THE PENGUIN FOWL PLAY IN GOTHAM CITY

SFX

BEETLEJUICE BEETLEJUICE
THE GHOST WITH THE MOST RETURNS

SPEAK NO EVIL
HOLD YOUR TONGUE!

THE WALKING DEAD
DARYL AND CAROL REUNITED

THE TRIPODS
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

DOCTOR WHO
SECRETS OF SEASON 25

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

AGATHA ALL ALONG

CAN THE MOTHER OF ALL MARVEL MAGIC GET HER GROOVE BACK? WITCH, PLEASE!

PLUS! LEGO STAR WARS / NEVER LET GO / SPACE: 1999 / UFO / CONAN / STRANGE DARLING / KELNACCA / STAR TREK 2000 AD / HALLOWEEN HORROR NIGHTS / SCI-FI DISCO!

FUTURE
ISSUE 383 OCTOBER 2024 £5.50
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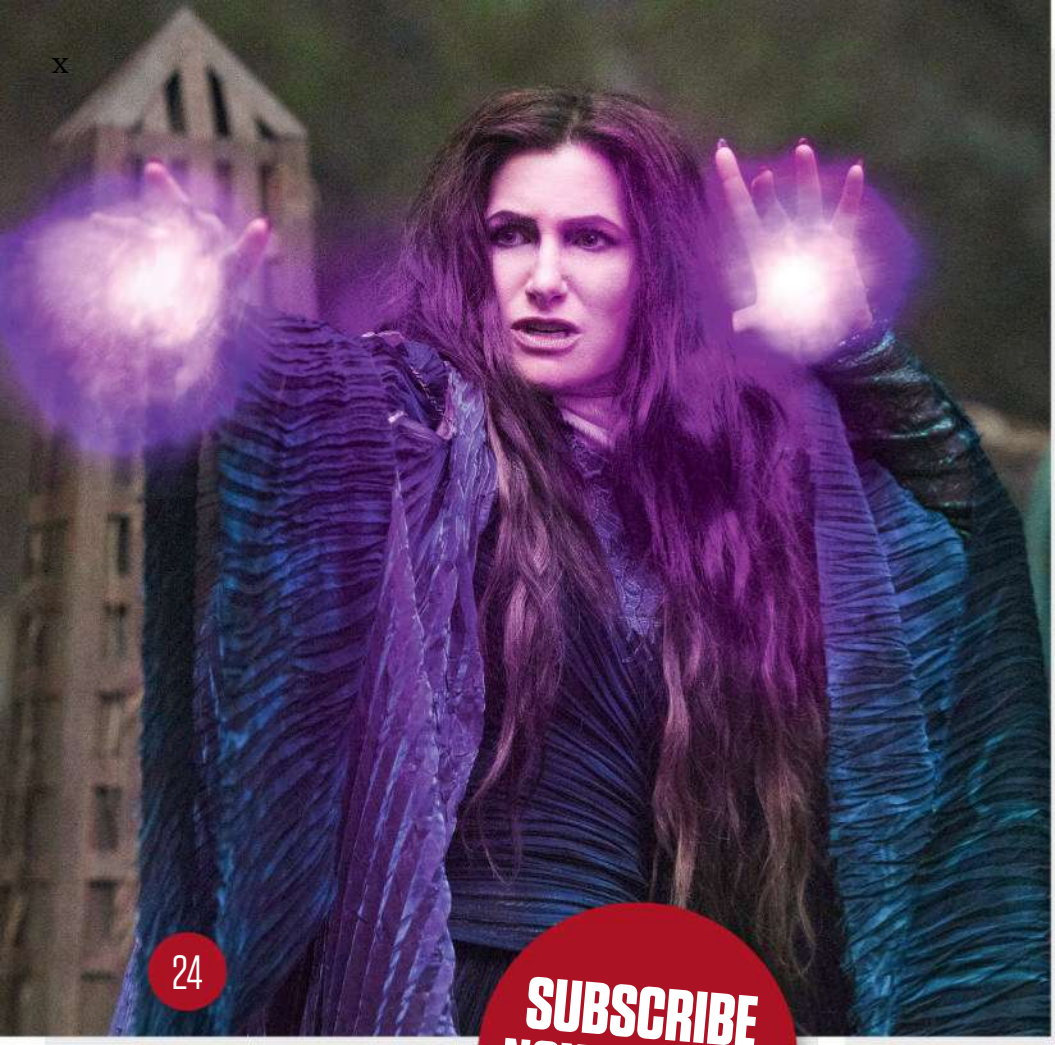
FROM THE TWISTED MINDS THAT BROUGHT YOU WandaVision
MARVEL TELEVISION
AGATHA ALL ALONG
Disney+
Two episode premiere | September 19



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Hubble, bubble, toil and... Marvel? Oh yes.

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Spot the landmarks in this month's quiz.

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Boogie Wonderland, sci-fi style.

Captain's Log

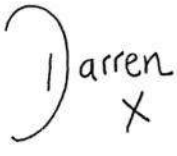
My favourite time of year fast approaches, and what better way to get prepared for Halloween and spooky season than to join a bunch of witches on a journey down a treacherous road? But also, who better than *SFX* to turn over those crisp golden leaves in search of the full story behind Marvel Studios' *Agatha All Along*? It's almost like they made it just for us...

It's always exciting to have something *new* come along – although, yes, granted, it is a sequel to *WandaVision*, but this does feel like new territory for Marvel, with some great scares in store. More of that please, Marvel!

We've got more ghosts and ghouls in the build-up to October, with *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* and *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon – The Book Of Carol*, but if that's not enough for you then just wait to see what's around the corner next issue...

Oh, and sorry to anyone who was expecting to see coverage of *Joker: Folie à Deux* – apparently no one from production was available to speak to long-lead magazines in time. Well, not this one anyway. Thank goodness for Team Reeves and all things *Penguin* then, as Oz and co tear up Gotham and still have time for a blether.

Enjoy, and meet us back here in four weeks for a very special issue of *SFX* – if you dare!



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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Agatha All Along* is a breath of fresh Fall air.
→ *Alien: Romulus* was everything I wanted from an *Alien* movie. Hits are hits for a reason, right?
→ On paper *The Penguin* wouldn't seem my kind of show at all, but after seeing episode one I can't wait for the rest.

RANTS

→ Come on UK cinemas, the popcorn buckets and assorted items you can buy in the US are *brilliant*. Plus: more money for you!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Been hammering the *Silent Running* soundtrack since buying an old copy on vinyl. Very restful – and I don't even like Joan Baez.
→ It probably doesn't warrant a review in *SFX*, but you've got to love BFI for putting together a Blu-ray of Vincent Price's 1971 cookery show *Cooking Price-Wise* (due 25 November).
→ If you're still on Twitter I strongly recommend @dailytombaker. It's a particular delight whenever they tweet a photo of Tom signing books for beaming kids.
→ Quite relieved that the forthcoming *Doctor Who* season 25 box set includes US documentary "The Making Of Silver Nemesis", as I've been fretting about binning my VHS copy for the last decade...

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Beetlejuice! Beetlejuice! BEETLEJUICE!

RANTS

→ Stop canning my fave shows! Bye-bye *Halo*!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Looking forward to seeing the 20th anniversary remaster of *Shaun Of The Dead* at the cinema. (Due on 27 September)

RANTS

→ Very sad to hear that David Lynch has emphysema (COPD). He's doing okay but it means he's effectively housebound now, so we're very unlikely to get another full-length feature from him. Kids, smoking isn't cool! (It is, though.)

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Found a total treasure at the Bath Book Fair – a book on *King Kong* with an inscription by Fay Wray, on behalf of herself and Kong! Reader, I bought it.
→ I've always loved the graphic design of the great ITC shows, so enjoyed Jaz Wiseman's book *ITC Entertained The World*. A feast of retro style.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Season two of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* looks fantastic and is fulfilling my high-fantasy feels. Missing the Arondir and Bronwyn of it all, but that's real life for you.
→ It's post-1 September, so unload everything Halloween on me now: *Halloween Baking Championship*, Halloween Horror Nights, stores splashed with orange and black. MOAR!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

OCTOBER 2024

NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// WOOKIEES!

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Why *Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy* lured Mark Hamill back

Highlights

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Events happen out of order in this horror, but saying any more would be a spoiler!

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A Quiet Place comes alive in a groundbreaking new haunted house.

18 CONAN THE BARBARIAN

A crossover event featuring the muscle man and other Robert E Howard characters.

Jedi Bob, voiced by Bobby Moynihan.

Darth Jar Jar is played by original actor Ahmed Best.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Bricks Remix

James Waugh explains how the entire **Lego Star Wars** galaxy gets rearrranged in a new "four piece" Disney+ miniseries

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

FANS OF *STAR WARS* and Lego have been fed especially well the last five years, with new *Lego Star Wars* videogames, fresh building sets and three Disney+ specials with stories set after the *Star Wars* sequels.

Now the creative team behind those specials return to remix their own work with the four-part miniseries event *Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy*. Directed by long-time Lego animator Chris Buckley, written by Dan Hernandez and Benji Samit (*Pokémon Detective Pikachu*) and executive-produced by James Waugh, *Rebuild The Galaxy* boasts an original story featuring the vocal talents of *Star Wars* legends Mark Hamill, Anthony Daniels, Billy Dee Williams and others, all giving their iconic characters very different spins.

Waugh tells Red Alert that to celebrate 25 years of the *Lego Star Wars* partnership, they wanted to mark the milestone by doing something new, told from a kids' POV. "We wanted a younger lens to take us through that adventure, and so we started thinking about 'What could that look like?'" Waugh explains. "We wanted it to feel handcrafted, like a kid could make the sets with either Lego or crafts in their room."

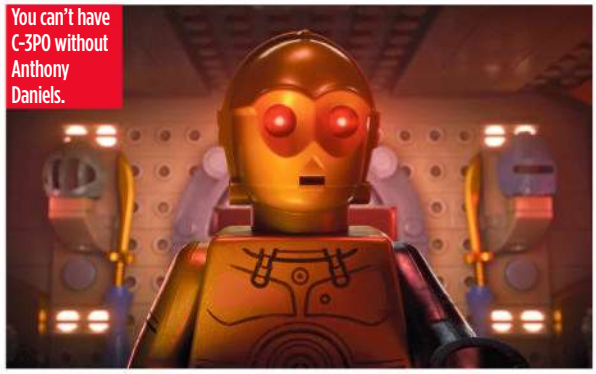
What snapped together is an original story built around brothers Sig Greebling (Gaten Matarazzo) and Dev Greebling (Tony Revolori). "[Sig] loves telling stories, but his brother is sort of the hot shot kid who could *be* the hero," Waugh says of the siblings.

When Sig takes a powerful Lego cornerstone artifact from a hidden Jedi temple, the whole galaxy goes topsy-turvy. "It's through a series of events, as we get tossed into the crazy, upside down rebuilt galaxy that he has to discover that he can be a hero too," Waugh says. "That's really the core of it: to be the type of hero that people will write stories or tell stories about. To me, the best *Star Wars* stories come down to the fact that we're all awakening a higher self. Whether it's Han Solo going from scoundrel to a hero, or Luke seeing the two suns and following his dream, it comes down to that sense of embracing your higher potential and calling."

Dev and Sig Greebling: brothers in arms.

Featuring a wide line-up of remixed *Star Wars* favourites, Waugh says the strength of this

Rebel AT-AT walkers. Aww, aren't they cute?


You can't have C-3PO without Anthony Daniels.

Darth Dev really is devilishly handsome.

"That's really the core of it: to be the type of hero that people will write stories about"

script brought back a lot of legendary talent – including their Holy Grail casting, Mark Hamill.

"He's never really done these for us before so we took a shot to ask him and really, really make a case," Waugh says of how they wooed the actor to the more playful Lego galaxy.

"What was interesting is in the first conversation with him, he said, 'I usually probably wouldn't do this, but this is such an unexpected turn of the character. It's not just me doing famous lines I've said before. There's a chance to build a little bit of a role here.' He had all sorts of ideas on dialogue and really waded it in, riffed a little bit and made that character his own."

Hamill joins others including Ahmed Best as Darth Jar Jar and Bobby Moynihan as Jedi Bob, a deep cut character who first appeared in the *Lego Star Wars Episode II: Attack Of The Clones* build set for the Republic Gunship. "It's starting to get to the place where it's not even *Star Wars* Lego without Bobby, in some ways," Waugh praises. "Watching Ahmed come to life as Jar Jar in the booth was mindblowing. He really embodies the character physically and just becomes him."

The miniseries features animation from Atomic Cartoons (who also produced *The Lego Star Wars Holiday Special*), and Waugh says he's excited for fans to see their new visual approach. "The last episode is cinematic, dynamic and feels like a *Star Wars* saga movie. This isn't me as a hype man saying this. It is fantastic," Waugh emphasises. "It's big, and that's a testament to the whole team, especially Chris Buckley who really brought so much to the camerawork."

Rebuild The Galaxy is a fully self-contained story that is resolved by the end of the miniseries. But... "Would we want to play in this sandbox where we could break apart the galaxy and do whatever, and bring all the other reference points that we love about *Star Wars* in so we could explore new ways of representing them? Sure, we'd love to do that," he confirms.

"But right now, this is really *this* moment. It was really looked at through the lens of these four episodes as a big miniseries event for this year. So we'll see."

Lego Star Wars: Rebuild The Galaxy is on Disney+ from 13 September.

SCI-FACT! **The world record for the largest display of *Star Wars* Lego minifigures is 36,440, achieved at 2019's *Star Wars* Celebration.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Mother Knows Best

Alexandre Aja on his new survivalist horror flick **Never Let Go**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

Samuel, Momma, Nolan and a very good boy.

THE "SURVIVALIST HORROR" IS A micro-genre that's had something of a resurgence in the past few years, with a spate of family-orientated fright flicks that have successfully crossed over to mainstream audiences. That's the hope, then, that director Alexandre Aja has for *Never Let Go*, a movie that has echoes of genre stablemates *A Quiet Place*, *It Comes At Night* and *Bird Box*, while at the same time carving its own distinct niche.

"This is a film that was presenting itself as a straightforward survival movie," says Aja about his first reactions to reading Kevin Coughlin and Ryan Grassby's script, "something in the vein of *Bird Box* and *A Quiet Place*, but then it was taking another direction. That's really what got me excited."

The movie follows a mother, played by Halle Berry (also an executive producer), and her twin sons (Anthony B Jenkins and Percy Daggs IV) who are living way off the grid in a cabin in the woods. Berry's character insists that they have to protect themselves from a malevolent spirit that has decimated the world outside.

So far, so *Evil Dead*, yet *Never Let Go* is no cartoon gorefest, instead exploring what happens to that family bond when one of the children begins to doubt the very existence of this mysterious threat. "I just fell in love with the story," enthuses the director. "It went into what it meant being a parent but also what it is being a child and what you believe and don't believe. It had a really strong impact on me – I just kept thinking about that script."

What distinguishes *Never Let Go* from Aja's other movies is that this is very much a chamber piece, with a bare bones cast. That's certainly new territory for the director, who broke through with 2006's guts-soaked *The Hills Have Eyes* remake, and last played in the horror sandpit in 2019 with the alligator monster movie *Crawl*.

"I saw it as something that was very intimate, and because it was intimate it could be much more scary," Aja says. "Not scary with

Should Momma (Halle Berry) really be worried?

the evil and where does the evil come from, and how it's smart and patient and can take whatever form to trick or seduce you, that was the interesting element. I hope people will come out with a discussion about what the evil was."

Aja is full of admiration for not just his leading actor ("She's just one of the most skilled and talented actresses out there"), but also for her pre-teen co-stars, both of whom have to do some fairly intense acting in this dramatic film.

"I wanted them to have a real brotherhood relationship," says the director about Anthony B Jenkins and Percy Daggs IV. "I remember the day we auditioned Percy: at the end, we were all in tears, it was really emotional. The same thing happened with Anthony. It was interesting, because I didn't want the two of them to be the same character, they're both very different in the story, but on set they really did become like brothers."

IN FEAR

Aja is clearly hoping that *Never Let Go* has a similar kind of crossover appeal as *A Quiet Place* and *M3GAN*, films that play beyond the horror hardcore. "I feel that this movie has a reach that's a little wider than *The Hills Have Eyes* or *Crawl*," he suggests.

"There is something that comes from that fairy tale approach that yes, it's scary, but it's not shocking – it's not about the blood or the gore, it's about something else. It's much more in the vein of *A Quiet Place* or a *Bird Box* or *The Sixth Sense* or *The Others*, movies that are definitely in the genre, but they're much more open to a wider audience."

As for the future, Aja says he's just about to start pre-production on a new movie. So, will this be another horror? "Oh yes," he smiles. "But I'm always trying to do something different. Genre to me is always a very strong, immersive experience, the type of movie that stays with you. I never have the feeling that I'm doing the same movie again."

Never Let Go is in cinemas from 27 September.

> **"It had a really strong impact on me – I kept thinking about that script"**

the shock value, but scarier in a psychological way, something that's very tied to parenthood – you know, should I trust the person that's meant to be protecting me?"

But *Never Let Go* is about more than that. What appealed to Aja is that the film works as an allegory for modern-day America, a country that is politically, and religiously, more polarised than ever before.

"It's about this divided world, between the people who believe and don't believe, between the people who ask questions and the people who don't," he says. "The question of what is

SCI-FACT! **Halle Berry's role required her to learn how to skin a squirrel. But don't worry, it wasn't a real one.**

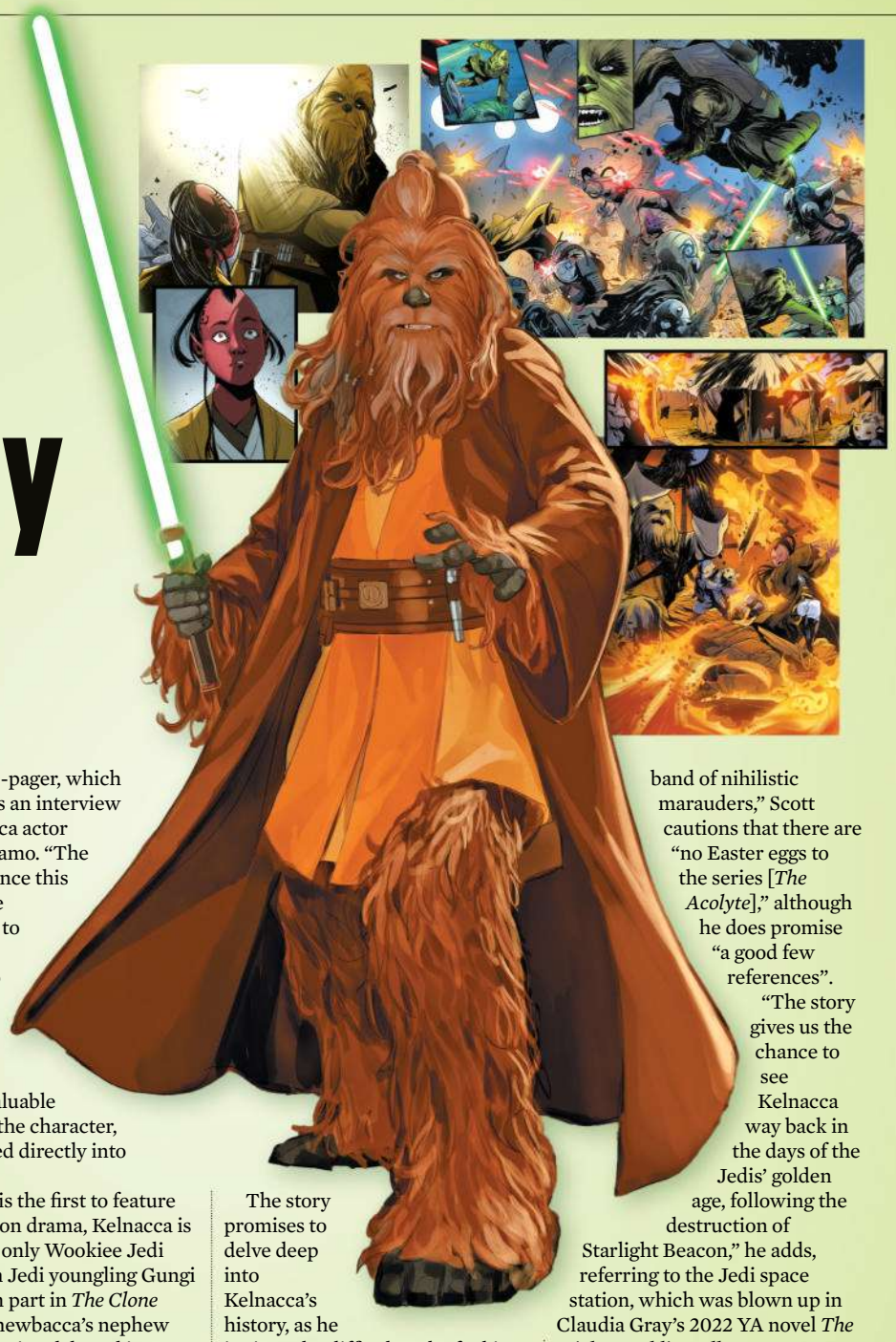
NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Robert Downey Jr is Doctor Doom in **Avengers: Doomsday**, directed by the Russo Bros.
- Nine Inch Nails to score **Tron: Ares**.
- Brad Bird returning to direct **The Incredibles 3**.
- Alexandre Aja (see left) to bring us an NYC-set sequel to gator flick **Crawl**.
- James Cameron reveals the third *Avatar* movie is titled **Avatar: Fire And Ash**.
- *Banshee*'s Jonathan Tropper writing Shawn Levy's **Star Wars** film.
- Alex Proyas to helm a movie of Karel Capek's 1920 play **RUR**.
- Josh O'Connor in the frame for Steven Spielberg's UFO film, reportedly titled **The Dish**.
- Zoe Saldana joining the voice cast of Pixar SF movie **Elio**.
- David F Sandberg to direct a big-screen adaptation of horror videogame **Until Dawn**.
- James Wan rumoured to be directing the **Creature From The Black Lagoon** remake.
- Marvel's "first family" movie to be called **The Fantastic Four: First Steps**. Aw, lookit baby Galactus, so cute...

DOMINIQUE CHARRIAU/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

SCI-FACT! George Lucas was initially against the idea of Wookiees becoming Jedi, believing they lacked the ability to command the Force.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Shaggy Dog Story

Cavan Scott on bringing Master Kelnacca to comics in a new **Star Wars** one-shot

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER HIS *STAR WARS* debut on *The Acolyte*, Wookiee Jedi Master Kelnacca is now making the transition to comics in a new one-shot by writer Cavan Scott and artist Marika Cresta. It takes place during the latter stages of the High Republic era, which has been chronicled for the past three years in a series of novels, comic books and now the Disney+ show, set around a century before the rise of the Empire.

"Lucasfilm and Marvel asked me as I have been writing the main Marvel *Star Wars: The High Republic* comic since 2021," says Scott, explaining how he came to script the 32-pager, which also includes an interview with Kelnacca actor Joonas Suotamo. "The main difference this time was the opportunity to speak to Joonas, who was so generous with his time, giving me valuable insight into the character, which has fed directly into the story."

Cover art for the issue, by Björn Barends.

While he is the first to feature in a live-action drama, Kelnacca is far from the only Wookiee Jedi Knight, with Jedi youngling Gungi having taken part in *The Clone Wars* and Chewbacca's nephew Lowbacca having debuted in Kevin J Anderson and Rebecca Moesta's 1995 novel *Young Jedi Knights: Heirs To The Force*.

"This is not my first Wookiee Jedi rodeo thanks to the inclusion of the first Padawan and now Jedi Knight Burryaga in the High Republic," says Scott. "But Kelnacca is a very different kettle of Kashyyykian fish as he's far more stoic and definitely less chatty. He takes his responsibilities seriously, thinking hard about every decision that comes his way."

The story promises to delve deep into Kelnacca's history, as he is given the difficult task of taking over the training of a young pupil who has lost their master.

"The interesting thing about writing such a long-lived character is that it gives us a chance to see what happens when a Jedi Master outlives their padawan," continues Scott, referring to the Wookiees' standard 400-year lifespan.

While hinting at an appearance from "one familiar face for readers of *Star Wars: The High Republic*, along with one iconic High Republic location and a certain band of nihilistic marauders," Scott cautions that there are "no Easter eggs to the series [*The Acolyte*]," although he does promise "a good few references".

"The story gives us the chance to see Kelnacca way back in the days of the Jedis' golden age, following the destruction of Starlight Beacon," he adds, referring to the Jedi space station, which was blown up in Claudia Gray's 2022 YA novel *The High Republic: Fallen Star*.

Having worked with her on previous issues of *Star Wars: The High Republic*, Scott is reuniting with artist Marika Cresta. "Working with Marika is always a joy," he says. "It won't be the last time we work together, as she is now the full-time artist on the main *Star Wars: The High Republic* run, which returns in February 2025 with Kelnacca himself joining the team!"

Star Wars: The Acolyte – Kelnacca issue one is out on 13 September.

Jake Bartok's variant wraparound cover.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Uh Oh, We're In Tribble

IDW celebrates **Star Trek** 500 with a cosmic crossover and added Tribbles WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER SETTING THE STAGE FOR 2023 CROSSOVER *DAY Of Blood* in 2022's *Star Trek* issue 400, *Star Trek* writers Jackson Lanzing and Collin Kelly – along with co-writer and *Star Trek: Defiant* scripter Christopher Cantwell – are again venturing into new territory in IDW's latest anniversary issue, which acts as a prelude to the dramatic events to come in 2025.

"When we started on the *Trek* comics line back in 2018 with a short story in the pages of the *Waypoint* anthology, we could never have imagined what incredible adventures awaited us," says Lanzing. "I can't help but feel like we're on the precipice of another moment now with *Star Trek* issue 500 as we boldly go into the biggest, craziest story in *Star Trek* comics history."

"*Day Of Blood* was an incredible story, one that had been brewing in our hearts for years," adds Kelly. "But it was also very light, focusing on, effectively, just one world. But even with Kahless's defeat, the ramifications of that brutal day have led us here to *Star Trek* 500. Coming in directly after our Pleroma arc, the USS Theseus has faced off with an old foe and been confronted with a force that threatens the very concept of cosmos. They have meddled in the affairs of gods and now it's time to reap the consequences."

Lanzing cryptically reveals that their story – illustrated by Davide Tinto – "exists all at once in all eras (of *Star Trek*) and none", and we can also expect appearances from Data and maybe Dr Arik Soong. According to Kelly, "Brent Spiner's characters are heavily featured, and while one of them is historically stoic the other is absolutely oozing dark charisma." While the 52-pager's seven stories span the original '60s show to *The Next Generation*, *Strange New Worlds* and *Lower Decks*, it opens with co-writers Jordan Blum and Patton Oswalt and artist Leonard Kirk's "I Knew You Were Tribble When You Walked In". "Patton and I like to focus on and explore the weird, overlooked characters," says Blum. "Telling a story from the point of view of the Tribbles felt right up our alley as our storytelling lives somewhere between absurdity and pathos, which is perfect for furry, tiny multiplying aliens."

Focusing "heavily on Kirk" and highlighting "the psychology and physiology of the Tribbles", Blum and Oswalt have drawn not only on 1967's classic "The Trouble With Tribbles" but also their return in 1996 *Deep Space Nine* episode "Trials And Tribble-ations", with cameos from the classic crew, old-school Klingons and *DS9*'s Sisko and Jadzia.

"We've found a way to '*Back To The Future Part II*' it, by which I mean tell a story happening just off-screen during 'The Trouble With Tribbles'," continues Blum. "It clicked with us that Kirk has had lots of love affairs with aliens, so what if he was in a one-sided tryst with the Tribbles that he was never aware of? We started laughing at the idea of writing a romance novel between the Tribbles and Kirk."

Star Trek issue 500 is out on 4 September.

SCI-FACT! **In "The Trouble With Tribbles" writer David Gerrold's original story outline, the Tribbles were called "Fuzzies".**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Camera Never Lies

JT Mollner spills (some of) the beans on his twist-laden horror **Strange Darling**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

Willa Fitzgerald (The Lady) and Kyle Gallner (The Demon).

JT MOLLNER REMEMBERS THE day his mind conjured up the image that would kickstart the writing of his second feature film. "I just started to see this woman running through the woods," he says, "being chased by this inescapable evil coming towards her."

It's a classic image from a thousand horror films, but not one that usually opens a movie – and that's what makes *Strange Darling* strikingly different. It's a cat and mouse story told in six chapters, but crucially not in chronological order. It's a puzzle, then, with various twists and turns that make talking about it a difficult thing for the writer/director.

"We had these uncomfortable conversations with distributors where people were like, 'Well, we love it, but the things we love about it we can't really put in the marketing material," Mollner tells Red Alert. "So it's been a delicate dance to make sure that people know there's more to this than just brutality and predation, and all the archetypal tropes that you see in the trailer. Those are in there, but there's more to it than that, without spoiling certain surprises for the audience."

So what can we tell you about a movie that relies on some major rug-pulls? Well, according to the official synopsis, "A relentless predator tracks an injured woman [played by *Reacher*'s Willa Fitzgerald] through the Oregon wilderness. The woman does her best to outsmart her attacker [Kyle Gallner], but with each tense moment she grows weaker and less able. He's a man on a mission, and it's only a matter of time before he captures his prey."

"That first image I had was born from the classic horror films from the '70s," Mollner says, "the final girl running through the woods. I thought, 'This is a cliché, but I'm very fascinated with this character. It's been done so many times, but is there more to say about this final girl?' Then the idea of it being chapter three came to me, which is the opening chapter."

Mollner says he was "as surprised as audiences have been" where the story took him. "It had to be in that order," he stresses, "but when we pitched the script, people liked it right away, but there was always some discussion about, 'Should this be in sequence? Is it going to be too confusing?' I really fought hard to make sure it stayed exactly in that order, because I think that if you disturb the ecosystem of the narrative, everything goes right off the rails."

If *Strange Darling*'s narrative structure is unconventional, so too is its aesthetic, with the movie opening with a title card proudly stating that it's shot entirely on 35mm film. Mollner and his director of photography Giovanni Ribisi (yes, the actor) are both celluloid loyalists, it seems.

"I don't think there's a right way and a wrong way to shoot a movie, but the right way for me is film," he explains. "Every director needs to have something that they're passionate about visually. Certain visual artists use either paint or they use a computer or they use pencil and for me, the paint is film.

Director JT Mollner has a good ponder.

> That first image I had was born from the classic horror films from the '70s

The Lady, as she's only known.

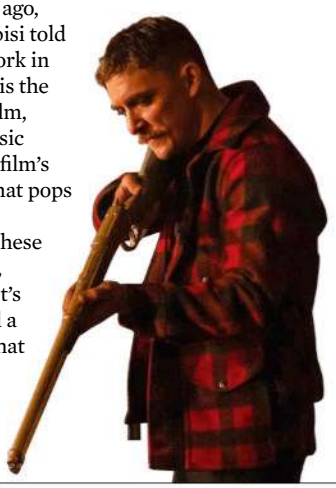
If it's not one thing, it's another...

"Damn it, we're all out of oven chips!"

Giovanni feels that way too – we're both such diehards."

Mollner and Ribisi met a few years ago, bonding over their love of movies. Ribisi told the director about his ambitions to work in cinematography, and *Strange Darling* is the actor's first DOP credit on a feature film, having previously shot shorts and music videos. Together, they worked on the film's distinctive palette, creating a movie that pops with primary colours.

"You watch *The Devils* and it's got these rich, saturated colours," Mollner says, referencing Ken Russell's 1971 film. "It's got this candy coating, but there's still a grain and a texture and a depth to it that makes it painterly and cinematic. So we wanted to find that – we didn't want to do a dirty, grindhouse-type film with fake scratches."



There were eight years between Mollner's first movie (the 2016 Western *Outlaws And Angels*) and this one, but Red Alert suspects that it won't be as long a wait for his third film. While the next JT Mollner script we'll see is his screenplay for Stephen King's *The Long Walk*, which Francis Lawrence is helming, he's up for being a filmmaker for hire.

"I think I'd like the next movie to be something I've written, and maybe that'll happen," he tells us. "But I'm also reading things that I haven't because I feel, well, Darren Aronofsky writes, but at some point *Black Swan* came across his desk, and that's one of his best movies. I'm just grateful to be in a position where I probably can make another movie soon."

Strange Darling is in cinemas from 20 September.

SCI-FACT! **JT Mollner's family have a business called Freakling Brothers, which runs haunted houses in Las Vegas.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Bruce Campbell voicing Ash in an animated version of **Evil Dead**, now in development.
- Tawny Newsome and Justin Simien writing a live-action **Star Trek** comedy series, set in the 25th century.
- Jensen Ackles and Aya Cash starring in **Vought Rising**, Prime Video's prequel to *The Boys*.
- Robert Picardo and Tig Notaro have enlisted as series regulars on **Star Trek: Starfleet Academy**.
- Paramount+ have cancelled **Halo** after two seasons.
- Dan Stevens stars in season three of **The Terror**, based on Victor LaValle's novel *The Devil In Silver*.
- Peacock abandon development of Sam Esmail's **Battlestar Galactica** reboot.
- Hudson Thames to voice Peter Parker in animated series **Your Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-Man**.
- Matt Berry joining season two of **Citadel**.
- *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* showrunner Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa developing horror-comedy **Bat Boy** with *One Piece*'s Joe Tracz.

VINCENT SANDOVAL/GETTY

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Those '70s Shows

James Swallow takes a trip back in time with his new **Space: 1999** and **UFO** novellas

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

COINCIDING WITH THIS YEAR'S Breakaway Day on 13 September (the date when the Moon was blown out of Earth orbit), Anderson Entertainment is publishing a pair of brand new novellas. These feature not only Commander John Koenig and the crew of Moonbase Alpha, but also Commander Ed Straker and the staff of the extraterrestrial-chasing SHADO.

First transmitted in 1970 and 1975 respectively, *UFO* and *Space: 1999* saw Gerry Anderson move into live action and consequently were more mature in tone than Supermarionation series like *Thunderbirds* and *Stingray* – something that author James Swallow has reflected in both *Space: 1999: The Armageddon Engine* and *UFO: Shadowplay*. "*UFO* dealt with issues like psychological trauma and drug use, and you had characters divorcing and murder going on in the background as opposed to just fighting aliens and it being all pow-pow, wham-bam action stuff," says Swallow.

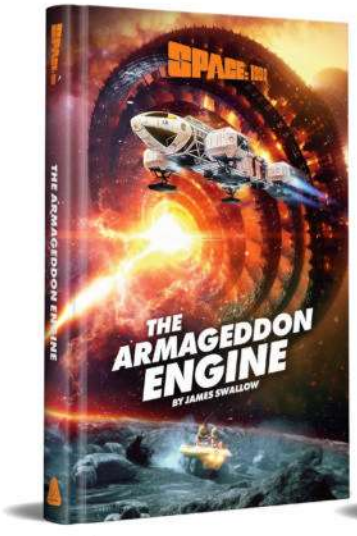
"You can see a bit of that in *Space: 1999* as well, although it has a more cosmic view of things. So that was definitely at the back of my mind as I was writing these stories. One thing I decided early on was to write them in the style of the original show, so it would be like if you stop watching the television show and pick up the novel, it should feel like a seamless transition."

Both stories take place at a crucial point for their particular show. "*Shadowplay* is set at the end of the one and only season of *UFO*. The ending was never really tied up, so the novel leads directly into that," continues Swallow. "With *The Armageddon Engine*, I deliberately set it in the gap between the first and second seasons of *Space: 1999*, where there's a tonal shift. The first season has more of an intellectual story going on whereas the second season is more action-paced, so I've tried to combine those two elements."

Shadowplay takes the form of a Cold War-style psychological thriller, with Straker descending into paranoia and delusion after an ESP experiment goes awry. "One of the touchstones for it was *The Prisoner*, which was about getting deep into the main character's head and playing with the nature of memory and reality," explains Swallow.

"Straker is such a driven person and has an incredible energy about him, so he fitted really well into this kind of story. But with *The Armageddon Engine*, it's much more of a space adventure, very much in the style of the show."

Swallow has included several members of the larger casts of both shows. "*Shadowplay* is about Ed Straker but most of the other characters get to pop in for a couple of scenes, so I had fun writing Paul Foster, Alec Freeman and Doctor Doug Jackson," he says. "It was the same with *Space: 1999* where I really liked scientific advisor Victor Bergman and chief pilot Alan Carter, so I made sure I gave them both some fun stuff to do."

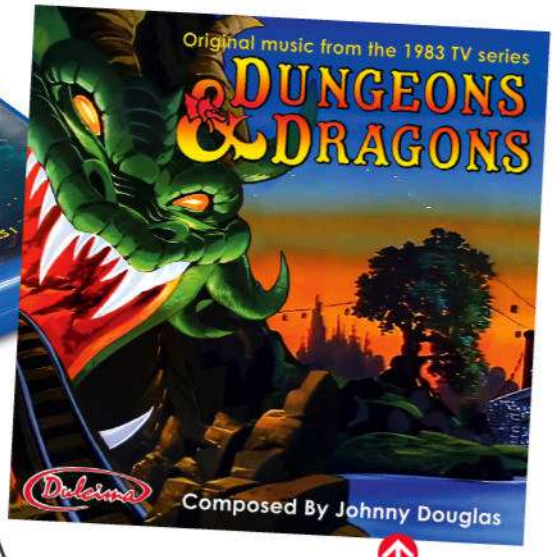


Space: 1999: The Armageddon Engine and UFO: Shadowplay are out on 13 September.

SCI-FACT! **The chance to write for Anderson Entertainment arose as Swallow shares an agent with its director (and Gerry's son), Jamie Anderson.**

MAXIMUM POWER!

The team behind *Doctor Who: The Collection* are bringing series one of *Blake's 7* to Blu-ray later this year. The six-disc set will include all 13 episodes newly remastered, as well as optional updated effects for every story. The set will also include hours of new features, including a brand new documentary as well as *The Making Of Blake's 7*. a previously unreleased 2002 doc by Kevin Davies.



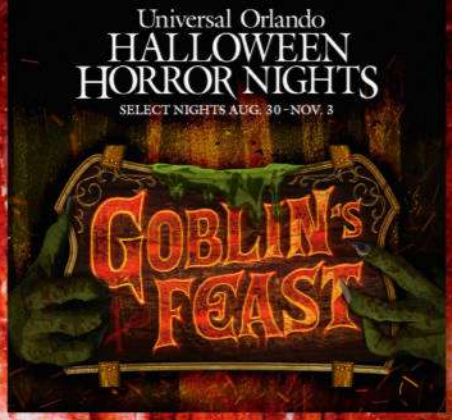
HEY, LOOK!

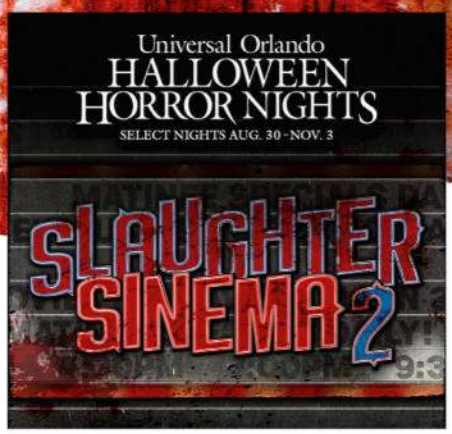
Johnny Douglas's original music from the 1983 *Dungeons & Dragons* animated series will be released to all streaming and downloading platforms on 10 September, marking 40 years since the first episode aired in the UK.
Visit dulcimarecords.com

WE'RE GOING TO NEED A BIGGER SHELF

Just when you thought it was safe to go back to the Lego Store, their latest release is lurking in wait. The Lego Ideas Jaws set is based on one of the most famous scenes in the Spielberg classic, and comes with minifigures of Chief Brody, Matt Hooper and Sam Quint. Headliner Bruce can also be displayed on his own stand.
Out now, £129.99, lego.com/jaws.

SCI-FACT! **A popular, if disturbing, fan theory about the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon is that the travellers died on the ride and are in Hell.**





CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Ghouls Allowed

Even silence can't save you at this year's **Halloween Horror Nights** WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THE AIM OF A THEME PARK haunted house is to make guests scream – so how do you adapt a film franchise where your very survival depends on silence? That was the problem for the creative team at Universal Studios when bringing *A Quiet Place* to life for their record-breaking Halloween Horror Nights event in Orlando and Hollywood.

"Uniquely different" is how queen of Halloween, Lora Sauls – one of the team at America's most popular spooky season attraction – describes the horror maze based on the first two movies in the series. "It's going to be a huge experiment," she tells Red Alert.

"The guests are a part of this – you can be quiet and just let the haunted house around you do the work. But we know not all guests are going to do that, we know some guests are going to be loud and yell and they're going to get a completely different experience. But we're not catering it to your sound. It's still a haunted house that's catered to our sound."

Specifically, that will mean a soundscape of environmentals, low-level drone and, of course, the terrifying clicking noise of the alien creatures, the Death Angels, as you walk through both films in scene order.

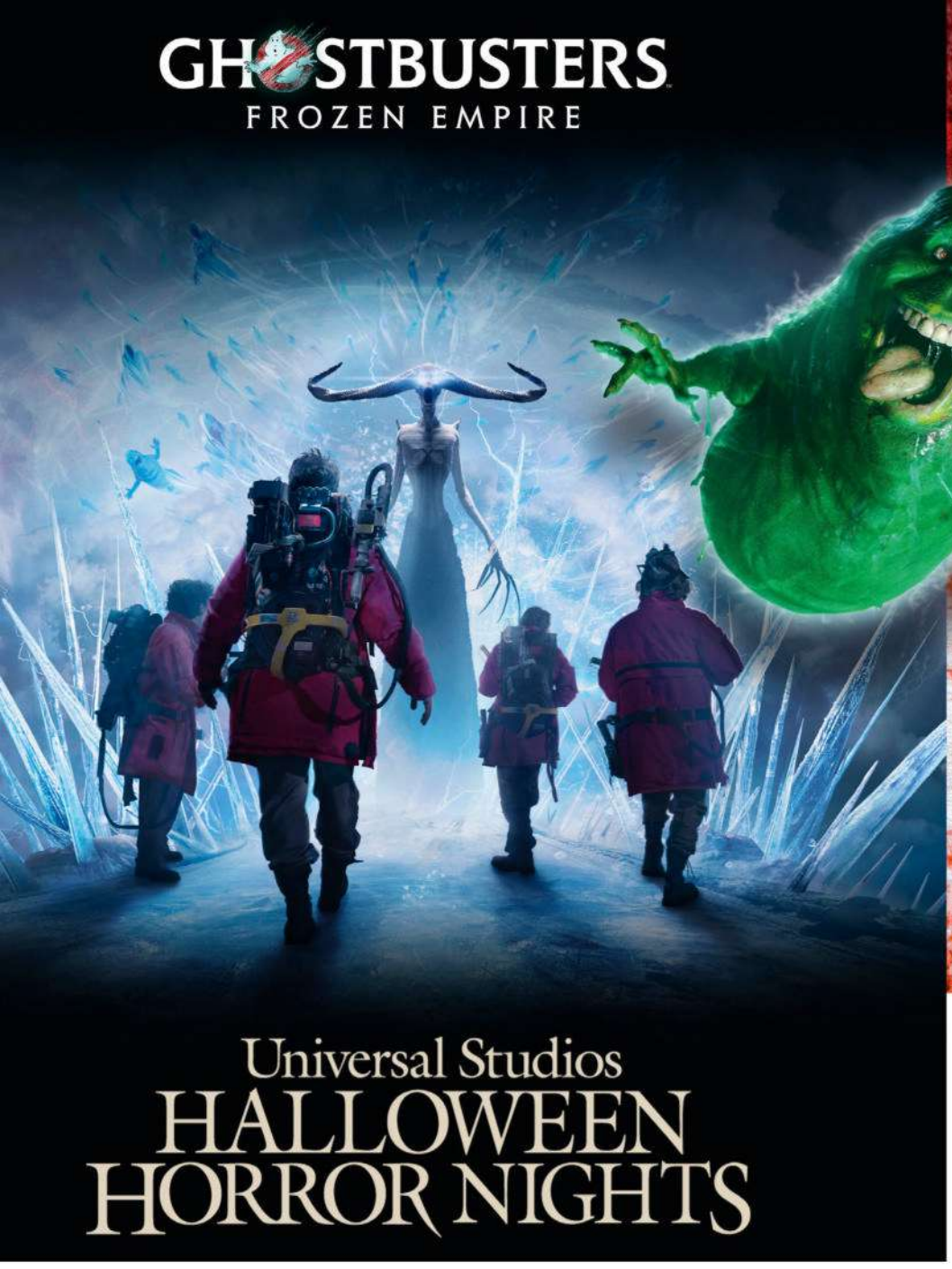
But you're not just going to hear the monsters, you're going to come face to face with life-size recreations in the form of puppets, animatronics and actor-activated versions. Standing at over eight feet tall, they are, Saul says, "*everywhere* in the house", adding that the team "came up with ways to really get them right in your face in multiple different ways.

"They're really quite hideous when you see them properly," she grins. "If you go back to those films, the creatures attack so quickly. So you're not really getting the full effect of how large their teeth are, what happens when all those plates open up, and they have the big cochlea to hear all those sounds... It's pretty horrific what they look like once you really get to see the inside of that!"

ARMY OF THE DEAD

Other screen-accurate cinematic moments joining *A Quiet Place* in the 10-strong line-up of late-night haunted houses this year are *Insidious: The Further*, *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* and all-female production *Universal Monsters: Eternal Bloodlines*, which is a new story based on classic characters.

There's also *Enter The Blumhouse*, one of five Scare Zones, where you'll encounter characters from *The Purge*, *The Black Phone* and *M3GAN*.



"I have a feeling that Insidious is going to be one of the scariest haunted houses"

With the *Insidious* house, guests will travel through the infamous red door and find themselves trapped in the Further with demons and ghosts galore. Sauls explains that they've embraced the most notorious element of the movies by having as many jumpscares as they possibly can in one haunted house.

"Usually, we have one or two scenes that we call the gauntlet of scares," she explains, referring to specific rooms that have intense moments of frights. "This *entire house* is a gauntlet of scares, which is incredible."

Expect to see the Lipstick-Face Demon, the Key Demon, the Long-Haired Fiend, the Bride in Black and many more. If you manage to keep your eyes open, that is.

"I have a feeling that *Insidious* is going to be one of the scariest haunted houses in this year's event," Sauls says. And yes, that includes hearing 'Tiptoe Thru' The Tulips With Me'.

While *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* follows the story of the most recent movie, one scene – set in an abandoned aquarium where Venkman is studying various ghosts – jumped out to the team.

"This gave us a great opportunity to bring back some of the franchise's more horrific ghosts," Sauls explains. "We've not done anything with *Ghostbusters 2* before, so you'll not only see the pink slime but you're gonna see Vigo in his most monstrous form. The terror dogs make an appearance, of course Slimer makes an appearance, but then all of these new horrific ghosts from *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*.

"You're gonna see Garraka multiple times throughout – he is this overwhelmingly giant ghost entity. Pukey, that little pink ghost that puked on everybody. We have hundreds of Mini-Pufts doing all kinds of mischievous things...

"It's a *beautiful* haunted house. It's *gorgeous*," Sauls smiles. "Really cool effects for how we're making the proton packs work this year with lighting and video, really cool effects for how we're bringing Slimer and all these different ghosts and demons to life. It's going to be *very* scary for a *Ghostbusters* house.

"When we all read that script, we all felt like, 'Ooh, *Ghostbusters* is going a little scarier than they've ever gone before'..."

Halloween Horror Nights is at Universal Orlando until 3 November. Visit halloweenhorrornights.com to book tickets (travel and accommodation not included).

TCD/PROD.DB / ALAMY, COLUMBIA PICTURES/COURTESY EVE/SHUTTERSTOCK, LORDRUNAR/GETTY

SCI-FACT! ***Eternal Bloodlines*** **sees Saskia Van Helsing taking on the Bride of Frankenstein, the She-Wolf and the Brides of Dracula.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Time War

Conan is crossing over with other Robert E Howard characters in comics and prose

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SINCE RELAUNCHING *CONAN The Barbarian* last year, writer Jim Zub has been building towards something much larger, seeding supernatural subplots in Titan Comics and Heroic Signatures' monthly title that are now being realised in miniseries *Battle Of The Black Stone*, which also involves several other Robert E Howard characters.

"The plan right from the start was to create a classic sword and sorcery comic readers could enjoy, but also reward them with bigger plot movements and unexpected pay-offs and synergies if they stuck around for the long haul," says Zub.

"Robert E Howard seeded connections between his characters and their shared history in a way that predates most fictional shared universes. There were obvious links, like Kull's Thurian Age as the pre-history of the Hyborian Age, and Conan villain Thoth-Amon's ancient ring as the central piece of the Kirowan and Conrad story 'The Haunter Of The Ring'. But also more subtle tethers, symbols and terminology being used in other stories as well," adds Zub.

"Whether it was for his own amusement, for expediency while writing for the pulps, or because he had a grand plan for it all, Howard wove the web, and we're just making those lines more elaborate to tell the biggest pulp stories possible and celebrate a cast of characters more people should know about."

Pages from *Conan: Battle Of The Black Stone.*

HOWARD'S WAY

Along with the Cimmerian himself, the four-parter includes appearances from Solomon Kane, Dark Agnes de Chastillon, El Borak, Professor John Kirowan, John Conrad and most intriguingly James Allison, who as a troubled pulp fiction author could be seen as an analogue for Howard himself.

"Every character Howard created reflected aspects of himself, his personality traits, fears or aspirations he was exploring or struggling with in his own life," says Zub. "James Allison is probably the most obvious one in that it's a writer living in rural Texas, feeling deep dread and awash in stories, and I'm absolutely leaning into some of the meta-nature of that."

With each protagonist hailing from separate milieus, balancing the contrasting elements of the various eras has been challenging for both Zub and artist Jonas Scharf. "My approach was different from character to character, but it certainly helped that Howard's characters are so archetypal," says Scharf. "So for Conan we wanted battle-hardened, scruffy 'capital B' Barbarian. His iconic look has been shaped by many incredible artists and it's impossible to divorce that from your own approach to the character. The same goes for Solomon Kane, El Borak and Dark Agnes, who I went at from the perspective of genre and what I felt would meet my expectations for a character within that genre and period.

"For Brissa's look, I went straight to [*Conan The Barbarian* artist] Rob de la Torre's pages, not only so readers would recognise her instantly but also to honour the initial design. Conrad and Kirowan were a bit of a blank slate, so there was more of a discussion about their characters and background and how that would shape their look."

The dramatic events of Battle Of The Black Stone also impact James Lovegrove's Conan novel *Cult Of The Obsidian Moon*, which nevertheless can be enjoyed independently of the comic. "Familiarity with the comics will allow readers to spot some fun parallels and references, but the novel has been designed for a general audience and is absolutely its own thing," says Lovegrove, who liaised closely with Zub and the *Conan* editorial team. "Our aim has been to enhance the Black Stone storyline without giving away any of the upcoming twists and surprises."

In the book, Conan joins forces with another lesser-known Howard character in Hunwulf the Wanderer, who debuted in 1934 short story "The Garden Of Fear". "It seems to be set in the Hyborian Age, thereby making Hunwulf a contemporary of Conan – and he's also one of the past-life incarnations of James Allison," says Lovegrove, who set his story early on in Conan's life, just after the death of his love interest Bêlit.

> **"Howard seeded connections between his characters"**

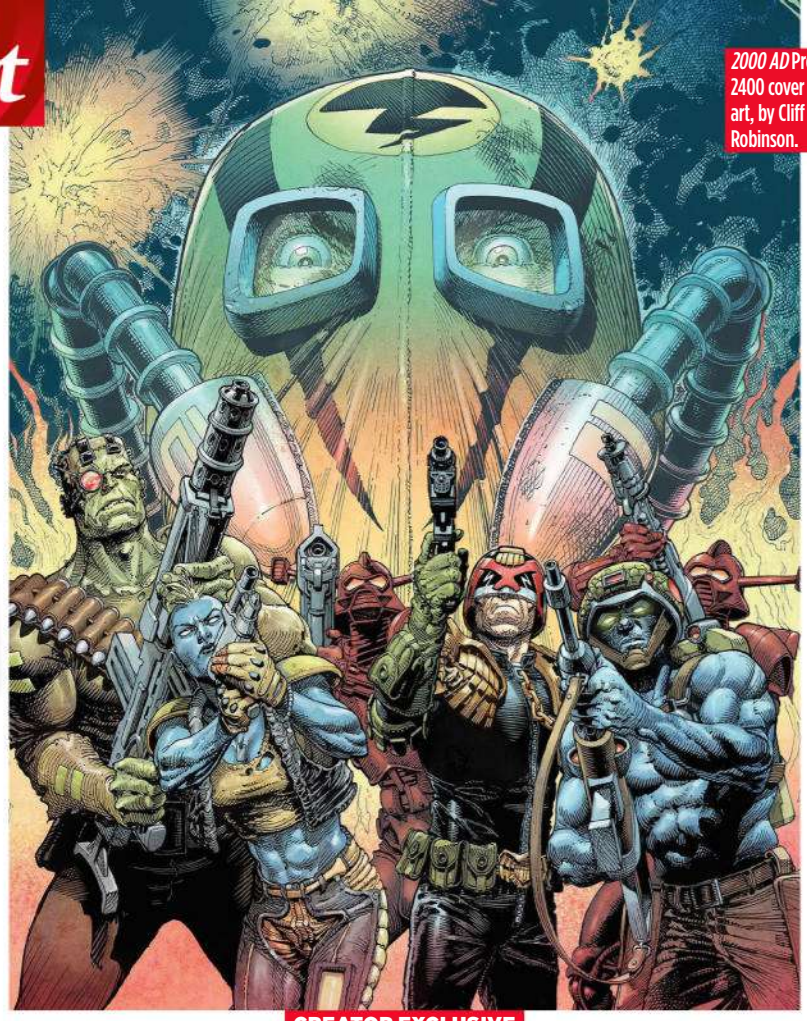
"The Cult of the Obsidian Moon are a bunch of monstrous, bat-winged baddies who are kidnapping children for certain nefarious purposes. Conan forges a friendship with Hunwulf, Hunwulf's wife Gudrun and their son Bjorn, and when Bjorn becomes their latest kidnappee, Conan gets involved in the rescue."

The ground is also laid for Battle Of The Black Stone in the recent *Savage Sword Of Conan* issue four, which comprises six solo stories, focused on Brissa, Solomon Kane, Dark Agnes, Conrad and Kirowan, El Borak and Conan himself.

"There's a horrific beast that's been set loose upon reality and its prey is anyone affected by the power of the Black Stone," teases Zub. "Who lives? Who dies? Where does the power come from? Read on and find out!"

Conan: Battle Of The Black Stone issue one is out on 4 September. Conan: The Cult Of The Obsidian Moon is out on 19 November.

SCI-FACT! Conan previously teamed up with Solomon Kane, Dark Agnes, James Allison and Moon Knight in Marvel's 2020 ***Serpent War***.



2000 AD Prog 2400 cover art, by Cliff Robinson.

Cover for the *Judge Dredd Megazine* issue 472.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Norts And Crossover

It's total future war in this year's *2000 AD* and *Judge Dredd Megazine* crossover, **Nordland Rising**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AHEAD OF Rogue Trooper's big-screen debut next year, his infamous enemies the Norts are declaring hostilities on *2000 AD*'s other future war strips in this year's annual crossover between the Galaxy's Greatest Comics.

"'Nordland Rising' is about what would happen if the Norts won the war against the Southers and then invaded the rest of the *2000 AD* multiverse, making alliances with the other bad guys there," says Ken Niemand, who scripts the Prog's lead Judge Dredd strip for artist John McCrea, in addition to the *Judge Dredd Megazine*'s four stories.

"The first half in *2000 AD* is about them attacking these other realities, such as teaming up with the Sovs to defeat Mega-City One during the Apocalypse War. And the second half, in the *Megazine*, is Dredd and the other *2000 AD* characters who survived the initial onslaught taking the battle back to their new combined enemies across several different realities."

"It was fun to go back to the Apocalypse War, and I got to tick off so many characters on my *2000 AD* bucket list, including Venus Bluegenes and the Kleggs," adds McCrea. "And in a blink or you'll miss it moment, Johnny Red and the Rat Pack from *Battle*."

Both the strips' original authors and more recent writers have been recruited. Peter Milligan teams up with Cam Smith on "Bad Company", while Dan Abnett and Nick Dyer take on "The VCs", and Ian Edginton pairs with Nick Percival on "Fiends Of The Eastern Front". "It was a real joy to return to The VCs, and this is the classic squad of Jupe, Smith, Ringer, Hen-Sho, Dwarf and Loon," says Abnett. "The VCs and Rogue Trooper were co-created by Gerry Finley-Day, and even though the wars they depict are very different there's a wonderful compatibility between them, so there's a certain synchronicity in bringing them together."

"Norts, Nazis and vampires are too good a combination to pass up and, of course, the vampire has to be Constanza from 'Fiends'," adds Ian Edginton. "He may literally be a monster but he also has a warrior's code of honour, which ultimately puts him at odds with the true villains of the piece."

"I got a kick out of mashing up the vampires with the hi-tech Nort soldiers," continues Nick Percival. "The coolest part was to put a new visual spin on the creatures, since they evolve into super-vampires who can finally go out and hunt in the blazing sun. Needless to say, there will be blood!"

Military police officer Atalia Jaegir, written and drawn here by original creators Gordon Rennie and Simon Coleby, plays a big part in what unfolds. "She's a Nort but has severe moral qualms about some of the stuff they do," teases Rennie. "The story was fun to do, not least because I got to show what the *Rogue Trooper* universe would be like if the Norts won the war on Nu Earth, and what happened to Rogue Trooper."

2000 AD Prog 2400 and Judge Dredd Megazine issue 472 are both out on 18 September.

SCI-FACT! **The second volume of *Essential Rogue Trooper*, "The Traitor General", is due for release in January.**

Titan have released an art print of this shot for the 1973 *Radio Times* special.

Star Trek x Doctor Who exhibit at Comic-Con.

(Right) Gugu Mbatha-Raw will appear in *TWBTLATS*.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ New Classic *Doctor Who* figures from Character Options are imminent at B&M stores in the UK. From season 25's "Remembrance Of The Daleks", Emperor Davros has his own release, while "Resurrection Of The Daleks" is the focus of The History Of The Daleks 18, with two different coloured figures.

◆ **A five-part spin-off series, *The War Between The Land And The Sea* was announced by showrunner Russell T Davies in Hall H at SDCC. Written by Davies and Pete McTighe, the show will star Russell Tovey and Gugu Mbatha-Raw in new roles with Jemma Redgrave and Alexander Devrient returning as Kate Lethbridge-Stewart and Colonel Ibrahim.**

Davies said: "I'm so lucky to work with such a magnificent cast. And this is a huge, muscular, thrilling drama which will shake the Whoniverse to its foundations. When the Doctor's not in town, the whole of humanity is in trouble." Filming began last month, with location shoots also due to take place abroad.

◆ In addition to the Into The Whoniverse panel – where the new companion played by Verada Sethu was named as Belinda Chandra – Davies and stars Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson recorded a live episode of the *Doctor Who Podcast*. Davies also shared a panel with *Star Trek* showrunner Alex Kurtzman.

◆ **Also announced at SDCC: a limited-time crossover game featuring characters from both *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, which launched on 1 August. East Side Games Group brought together *Doctor Who: Lost In Time* and *Star Trek: Lower Decks Mobile* to celebrate International Friendship Day.**

◆ An exhibition was also held in the Gaslamp District of San Diego during SDCC 2024, showcasing costumes and props from *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* together. Attendees were given a set of friendship bracelets.

◆ **Fans attending SDCC in 2025 can look forward to the US premiere of the exhibition *Doctor Who – Worlds Of Wonder: Where Science Meets Fiction*, which opens at San Diego's Comic-Con Museum in March 2025.**

◆ Cast for the Christmas special "Joy To The World" has been announced. Joining Nicola Coughlan as Joy will be Jonathan Aris, Phil Baxter, Peter Benedict, Samuel Sherpa-Moore, Niamh Marie Smith, Julia Watson and Steph de Whalley. The opening sequence featuring all these actors debuted in Hall H at SDCC and is now available on the official *Doctor Who* YouTube channel.

◆ **The Tristram Cary and Mark Ayres soundtrack for "The Daleks In Colour" will be released by Silva Screen as a two-disc CD on 13 September.**

◆ The TV soundtrack of "The Crusade", featuring narration by William Russell, will be released on double green-and-yellow translucent vinyl by Demon Records on 4 October.

◆ **Titan continues to release new merchandise from both current and Classic *Doctor Who*. A Christmas jumper featuring Ncuti Gatwa is due this month, alongside new vinyl figures and TARDIS models. Items from the Time Lord Tuesdays range include merchandise related to "The Greatest Show In The Galaxy" and "The Happiness Patrol." Visit forbiddenplanet.com to order.**

◆ BBC Audiobooks will release brand new Fifteenth Doctor adventures *On Ghost Beach* and *Sting Of The Sasquatch* on 7 November, read by Susan Twist and Genesis Lynea respectively.

◆ **Big Finish has announced new audio drama releases. Box set *The Paternoster Gang: Trespassers – No Place Like Home* is due in December, while Peter Purves returns in *The First Doctor Adventures: The Living Darkness*, in January 2025. Also due in January is brand new range *The Worlds Of Doctor Who – Zygon Century: Infiltration*.**

SCI-FACT! Russell T Davies and Pete McTighe have written two episodes of *TWBTLATS* each, and have jointly written one together.

SCI-FACT! **Patti Yasutake was also a contender for the role of Keiko O'Brien, introduced in the same season of *The Next Generation*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

PATTI YASUTAKE 1953-2024

Remembering *Star Trek*'s Nurse Ogawa

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

PATTI YASUTAKE WOULD always remember the moment she stepped into the 24th century: "When I entered the soundstage, even though I first saw all the sets from behind, it was still wondrous and exciting to walk around to the front of them and realise I was on the Enterprise."

Born Patricia Sue Yasutake and raised in Gardena and Inglewood, California, she graduated from UCLA with honours in theatre. After a stint at East West Players, performing in over a dozen stage productions, she began to pursue screen roles, finding herself frequently frustrated by the industry.

"There [were] really no opportunities to have a career as an Asian American actress," she recalled in 2023. "I didn't do martial arts, I didn't speak a second language. Especially back then, that's all they saw you as."

Patti Yasutake at the premiere of *Beef* in 2023.

Yasutake landed a role in Ron Howard's 1986 comedy *Gung Ho*, reprising the character in a short-lived TV spin-off, and made appearances in *TJ Hooker* and *Tales From The Crypt*. In 1990 she was cast as Nurse Alyssa Ogawa in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Future Imperfect" – even though the character was originally part of an illusory future created in a holo-simulation, Yasutake was invited back and became a popular supporting player.

Ogawa featured in 16 episodes of *The Next Generation* and returned on the big screen in *Star Trek: Generations* and *Star Trek: First Contact*. Yasutake also played the character in a 1993 commercial for *Trek*-themed Hallmark ornaments and voiced the 2001 videogame *Star Trek: Armada II*. In recent years she had a regular role on Emmy-winning Netflix comedy *Beef*.

She had only one, amusing regret from her days on the final frontier. "I never got transported, but maybe I would've ended up the one who didn't come back, so perhaps just as well."

As Nurse Alyssa Ogawa in *Star Trek: TNG*.

© PARAMOUNT, MICHAEL BUCKNER/GETTY

CHARLES CYPHERS 1939-2024

American actor who played Sheriff Leigh Brackett in the *Halloween* movies.

RAY CHAN 1967-2024

British art director and production designer who worked on many Marvel projects.

NEW AUTHOR

BILL WOOD

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND YA HORROR *LET'S SPLIT UP*

Tell us about your protagonists.
→ There's four main characters: Cam, Jonesy, Amber and Buffy. I wanted them to almost be a stereotype of '90s teen movie characters, so there's the new girl, the nerd... In short, they're an unlikely group of friends who come together to solve a mystery before it's too late.

How long did it take to write?
→ I started writing this book in June 2021. However, some scenes were repurposed from old university screenwriting assignments I had. Unintentionally, as I wrote the book it became more of a horror-comedy, harking back to *Scream*, and even *Scary Movie* with its meta commentary.

Do you have to do much research?
→ Most of the research was making sure it was historically accurate. It sounds silly as it's only set in 2001, but times have changed a lot since then.

What's your favourite scary movie?
→ In terms of rewatches, *Scream* is the winner for me. It's just the perfect blend of horror, comedy, originality and self-awareness. It's closely followed up by *The Descent*, which I think is undeniably terrifying. And I have to throw in *The Evil Dead* too.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ Just write. The first draft is almost always bad. And yeah, that can be disheartening. But that's what editing is for. Once you have the base of the story down, that's when you can make your story the best it can be.

Let's Split Up is out on 26 September, published by Scholastic.

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SFX
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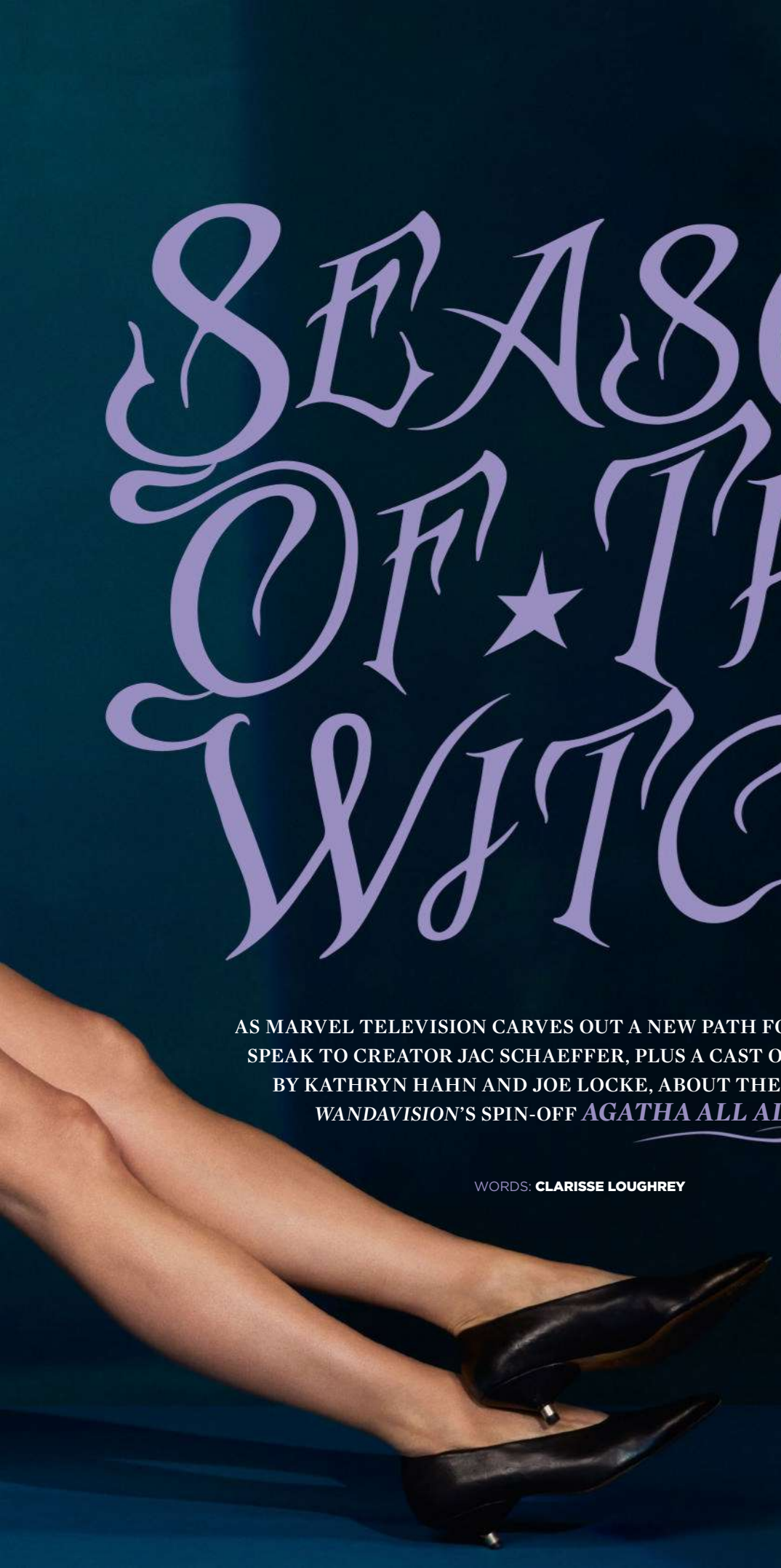
SEASON OF THE WITCH

AS MARVEL TELEVISION CARVES OUT A NEW PATH FOR ITSELF, WE SPEAK TO CREATOR JAC SCHAEFFER, PLUS A CAST OF STARS LED BY KATHRYN HAHN AND JOE LOCKE, ABOUT THE MAGIC OF *WANDAVISION*'S SPIN-OFF *AGATHA ALL ALONG*

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**



PORTRAIT BY GIZELLE HERNANDEZ

Agatha (Kathryn Hahn) with Teen.

THERE'S NO HIGHER COMPLIMENT TO be paid than becoming the subject of a drag brunch. When clips from a *WandaVision*-themed event in Minneapolis, in which queens high-kicked and death-dropped in the boots, capes and robes of Agatha Harkness and the Scarlet Witch, reached stars Kathryn Hahn and Elizabeth Olsen, they were overjoyed.

"I remember Lizzie being, like, 'Well, we've made it,'" Hahn tells *SFX*. "It was the coolest homage."

"It was so beautiful and thrilling to have our show celebrated in this way," creator Jac Schaeffer adds. "I could cry thinking about it. I have thought about that drag brunch most days making *Agatha All Along*. I wanted this show to be worthy of that type of fandom and adulation."

Hahn's Agatha is the Salem witch with a taste for darkness, the one secretly pulling the strings in Wanda Maximoff's sitcom dream, before proudly revealing those strings in a viral theme tune that's now inspired the title of her spin-off series, *Agatha All Along*. She's self-reliant, imperious and quite a bit wicked, a creation so singular in Marvel's Cinematic Universe that she simply refused to leave Schaeffer's head.

The writer-producer had signed a deal with Marvel Studios to develop new projects and yet, in every pitch she made to its president Kevin Feige, Agatha somehow crept her way in. "I was like, 'And then they get in a car and they find themselves in Westview'," Schaeffer laughs. "'Then left turn and there's Agatha and, little did you know, it was Agatha all along!'" So, Feige cut to the chase: why not simply give Agatha her own show? "It felt so obvious to us once he said it," she says. "She was the one."

Agatha All Along will be the first series out of the gate under the new Marvel Television banner, created to add some creative separation from its film unit, and to place someone like Schaeffer in the more traditional role of showrunner (on *WandaVision*, she was credited as creator and head writer). She also directs three episodes.

"I still subscribe to the initial pitch about what [the Marvel series] were meant to be, which was like a run of a comic," she says. "Because of the episodic nature of it, and the length of it, that it could be a deeper dive into the characters. That's what it has been. What's evolved under [Head of Television] Brad Winderbaum is the idea that it's not homework. It's not so much about the interconnected pieces than it's an opportunity to go down a rabbit hole with a character or a set of characters. That's been the ride for me on both *WandaVision* and *Agatha*."

Agatha All Along starts, essentially, where *WandaVision* dropped off, with the witch →

Agatha in a flashback to a *WandaVision* persona.

STOCK ELEMENTS: MAGICPICS/GETTY

PORTRAIT BY GIZELLE HERNANDEZ

MEET AUBREY PLAZA'S RIO VIDAL

As the author of the *Christmas Witch* books, this is familiar territory for you. How much of your own stamp were you able to put on the character of Rio Vidal?

★ I think we were all really allowed to embrace our own interpretation of the character and infuse our own energy into it. I've dabbled in little versions of things like this, but I've never really fully been able to immerse myself in a complete witchy world, with other witches and a coven, and a whole season arc of things to play with.

What was it like to work with this cast of incredible women?

★ It's no surprise to me that when you get a group of women together, magic and power happens. That's why, in history, men are scared of women gathering, because powerful things can happen. There was a healing energy to being on the show and being with this group of women. It was a really amazing group of souls. We all are so different. But we're all on the same page. We believed in the material and we took it to heart. We really didn't take it lightly.

You've already dabbled in the wider Marvel world, with your role in FX's *Legion*. How did this differ?

★ It was completely different. *Legion* had a very male-dominated energy. I play a character who becomes possessed by the Shadow King who is this villainous, male figure. I become this figure and then, later in the season, I become dominated by this figure. It was the opposite of empowering, unfortunately. Season one was very empowering. I thought it was really fun to become this Shadow King, but then after season one, it didn't really deliver on that for me. It kind of took a hard left turn there.

You get involved in some fights in this. Surely that's an MCU right of passage?

★ Oh yeah, there was absurd training. We got to fight. I got to do some classic Marvel manoeuvres, classic stances. I got to do some wire work. It was really fun to work with that team. We had amazing stunt doubles and choreographers. It's fun to even come up with the choreography of fighting with a woman because there are so many nuances and different things that you infuse into it. So it was a really creative, fun process as well.

We've been teased a scarier brand of Marvel show. What can we expect from that side?

★ It reminded me of *The Craft*, honestly, because I rewatched *The Craft* recently and that movie scared the crap out of me. When you're dealing with the Dark Arts, and you're dealing with people that turn villainous or turn evil and you don't know what they're capable of – there's something otherworldly, creepy-scary about it. I feel like this has that going for it. It's got this ominous tone.

RODIN ECKENROTH/GETTY

MEET ALI AHN'S ALICE WU-GULLIVER

Your character already exists in the comics. What did you draw from those origins?

★ When I was researching this character, I could only find two real references. It's liberating to have a character where there's not that much in the comics. Jac had this whole imagination and I could just riff off of that. I wasn't beholden to anything. In the actual comic, Alice's mother is a witch. One of the things in the show is that Alice is descended from a witch. In the comics, the character is based in another city, and in our version she's very much American. What the mother is doing as her profession is different. But it's cool Jac took inspiration from it.

Were you trained in spell casting? What was that like?

★ We did one Zoom session with a woman that did work with Kathryn and Lizzie [Olsen] on some of that hand choreography. What was great about it was just to have some vocabulary. We just play with different arm motions, different hand options. Each witch has her own speciality in the show. My character, for a lot of it, she's kind of hiding in plain sight. But I thought of her literally as trying to hide her body. She wears this big jacket in the first episode and everything is protecting her little, mushy heart with this very tough exterior.

We've been promised musical segments. So how intimidating was it to sing in front of Patti LuPone?

★ There's definitely a lot of music in the show. I remember there was one day where she turned to me after a take and gave me this really lovely compliment, and I just had to freeze and sort of be like, "Oh my god, if high school me knew that one day Patti LuPone was going to say something to me about my frickin' voice I would have died." I have so many voice notes that I've saved from Patti because one of these days I'm going to have another dark night of the soul and I'm gonna need to listen to this voice recording to be like, "Bitch, Patti LuPone told you you were great, so just suck it up!"

***WandaVision* was really embraced by the queer side of the Marvel fandom. How does this show pay tribute to the people who often get sidelined in conversations about who the MCU is for?**

★ I think we all associate Marvel fans as a certain kind of fan. But I think that community is actually really diverse and I do think this show is very queer, in the best way – not only is it about witches, but in that embrace of camp and the elements of *WandaVision* that were so beloved and surprising for people. I think it also has the potential to welcome new audiences, in because you don't need to have the whole lore of Marvel. These stories, and these women in the show, provide a new kind of entry point into the universe.

THEO WARGO/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

Follow the blue brick road into gawd knows what.

imprisoned in Westview under Wanda's spell. There's a glimpse of it in the show's trailer, in which she's seen shuffling around a gritty true crime series, in a dirty anorak with a coffee in hand, with shades of *Mare Of Easttown*.

A gag originally cut from *WandaVision*, it made them feel, according to the showrunner, like "kids in a candy store. The two of us were so stupid and silly about the tropes of the grizzled female detective. Kathryn referred to her as chronically dehydrated." Schaeffer and Hahn are big fans of the genre – Schaeffer shouts out *True Detective* and *Longlegs*, while Hahn's favourite is *Broadchurch*.

Once Agatha liberates herself from Wanda's punishment, she's met with a mysterious goth officially referred to only as "Teen" (Joe Locke), who enlists her to face with him the trials of the pseudo-mythic Witches' Road.

To do that, she'll need a coven. "In *WandaVision*, we saw her at the height of her glory," says Hahn. "In *Agatha All Along*, there is a stripping-down. We kept calling her a blooming onion. There's a stripping down of all that artifice, all that performance, to what really lies under all of it, and then to put back on all the above layers. She really needs this ragtag group to get her powers back."

Some of *Agatha All Along*'s witches will be familiar to comic book readers, others are original creations: Aubrey Plaza's Rio Vidal, Sasheer Zamata's Jennifer Kale, Ali Ahn's Alice

"I don't know, I'm just not feeling it, are you?"

Teen (Joe Locke) and Agatha: shenanigans.

Sicilian witch Lilia Calderu (Patti LuPone) .

The coven finds... a shiny new lair, possibly?

Wu-Gulliver, and Patti LuPone's Lilia Calderu. "Very early on, I was like, 'What would be the hardest thing for Agatha Harkness to do? Gather a coven'," Schaeffer says. "Agatha is not a team player, she's just not a joiner. So it served the story to try and cast the widest net and get the most disparate players involved. We also had both the burden and the privilege of defining witches inside of the MCU, and we did not take that lightly.

"I've had enough time at Marvel where I've seen it play out in ways where I was, like, 'Phew! That wasn't what we meant, but there's where that went.' That's pretty cool." She continues, "The mindfulness of it is about Marvel's communication with me of, 'What are the needs? What do we need to be careful about? What do we need to protect?' It's rare that something has come down that burns what I want to do or hems me in in any way. It's usually about leaving doors open."

THE NAME GAME

One of the doors here is labelled Wanda Maximoff, whose status at the end of *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* could be most accurately described as Schrödinger's Witch. Alive or dead, she echoes throughout *Agatha All Along*'s first trailer, as a set of blackened fingers and a name on a library card. It's reminiscent of the ghostly but unseen presence that lingers across Daphne du Maurier's gothic classic *Rebecca*. Schaeffer and Hahn agree with the comparison. "Like a final chord on a story has not been hit," Hahn teases. "Nothing has been resolved. And because it was Wanda that has put Agatha in this position, she is definitely in the ether, I'd say."

> **"We had both the burden and the privilege of defining witches inside of the MCU"**

"What got me the most excited," Schaeffer adds, "was right at the end [of *WandaVision*], when she finally faces off with Wanda. Does she want to destroy Wanda? Does she want to be best friends with Wanda? Does she want to braid Wanda's hair? Does she want to kiss Wanda? Does she want to go on a rampage with Wanda? Yes to all, and that was fascinating to me."

Another door simply says, "Teen". The internet has its own ideas as to the true identity of Locke's character. "It is one of the central mysteries of the show," Schaeffer teases. "It is a show that is very much about that relationship between those two characters."

And, like *WandaVision* before it, *Agatha All Along* wears the witch's trickster spirit with pride. The series was initially announced as

Continued on page 32...

COVEN CONFIDENTIAL 3

MEET SASHEER ZAMATA'S JENNIFER KALE

You've already tackled witchcraft in your standup show, *The First Woman*. How much of that knowledge were you able to work in here?

★ I remember talking to Jac Schaeffer and being like, "You do know you hired a witch?" I was very much already invested in this whole lifestyle. I actually did a show in Georgia, and Jac and [executive producer] Mary Livanos were there and saw me do a lot of that material. They were like, "Oh my god, we can't believe how perfectly this already fits."

What, for you, is empowering about the witch?

★ There are a lot of people who have positioned women who confuse them or anger them, or people who don't exactly have a box you can put them in, as a witch. I like that the show explores different stereotypes witches have had put upon them, and hopefully also shows the evolution of the witch over history, and what a witch could look like now.

Me and one of the producers did a lot of research on midwifery before we started shooting, because my character has a history with that. It was very interesting to see how midwives or women in the medical field actually got pushed aside by men because they wanted to dominate those practices. It's easier to label a woman as unprofessional or not sanitary because they're a witch and they're using nature and tinctures and whatnot.

You're playing Jennifer Kale, who has such a fascinating history in the comics. The MCU tends to rewrite origins and characters, but do you daydream a little about where her future might take her? Maybe as part of the Midnight Sons team?

★ I did try to look up Jennifer Kale in the comics. But ultimately, yes, you're right that the MCU television and film departments do kind of take inspiration from the comics and then make the story into its own to serve a bigger picture. I feel like people are going to be excited by the changes that we made with this character and how she connects to the universe at large.

I'm looking at all the ways Jennifer Kale can be called back at any moment to work with Dr Strange or with other witches or the Midnight Sons. The comics used her in many different ways. So I would really hope to see that happen in the shows and movies too.

What's it like to bond with your co-stars not just as a cast, but as a coven?

★ It's nice that everyone truly nerded out about this show, and was so excited to be there. Because we shot in Georgia, it kind of felt like summer camp, because we were all away from our families and our friends and our normal environment. So we did kind of form this coven together and we are still close, we still have our group chat.

MOMODU MANSARAY/FILMMAGIC/GETTY

TEENAGE DREAM

JOE LOCKE HITS THE ROAD RUNNING

There's been a lot of speculation about who Teen is...

★ One of the great things about Marvel and its inherent secrecy is that fan speculation is always great for the show, because it means people are talking about it. It's always interesting to look at what people are saying and guessing who [they] think people might be or what might happen.

Some people are very on and most people are very not on it. It's quite nice to be like, "Hi, you're so wrong, and you don't even know how wrong you are." Me and Kathryn have talked about how it's really nice to have a secret to keep and know all the secrets in the show. But also, now it's time to send our child off to school. It's like, "Okay, you go out in the world now."

Teen is another step for representation in the MCU. How important was it for you that he lives life as his authentic self?

★ Really important. The MCU – and any Marvel project – has this weird ability to unite the whole world. No matter where you're from, who you are, everyone knows about the new Marvel series, the new Marvel film, which is a really great way to progress social issues in the world. To have a real authentic portrayal of a queer character in that sphere where, no matter your background, everyone's on equal footing.

You can never change opinions in the world with hate, you can only ever change opinions through looking at something positively. Having queer characters in Marvel projects as just a normal character, it doesn't define them. I think a lot of queer characters in media today, that becomes their personality, almost. That's a great thing, having queer characters, but it's almost quite a damaging trope to push.

It's almost like this is the next stage of representation, where there's no part of this series that hides his queerness, there are lots of scenes and it's a big part of him, but also it's not the main part of him. It's just one part of lots of different personality tropes he has, and he's a very complex character and that's just one of his defining features, which is really nice.

Did you have any input into the character?

★ Yeah, I worked very closely with Jac and Mary and all of our directors. Obviously there's words on the page and a certain thing they're going for, but they were really great in letting me put my own spin on Teen, and really making him my own and adding my own element of comedy and my own personality into it. Which was really great, especially when you're working with such comedic pros like Kathryn and Aubrey. Everyone was so funny on set. So it was nice to be able to put my own spin on him.

What else can you say about Teen's journey?

★ He feels very at home in the coven. He's living his dream, being able to be part of a coven and go on the Witches' Road. But he's got a great arc in this season. It was really fun to play, and it doesn't really necessarily go in the way that people will expect.

What was your costuming experience like?

★ Incredible. Daniel, our costume designer, and all of his team worked so hard on making such amazing costumes. There's lots of things that I can't wait to talk about in the way all of the costumes link. Every costume that we wear, they're all linked together in some way. There are some really great clever things that they do that most people won't even notice, but are so integral to the show working. It was just really beautiful.

What was the on-set experience like?

★ Because we use mostly practical sets, it meant that we had lots of practical effects as well. So real fire, real water, real everything. Every episode of our show is like a different adventure. The road set was the size of a football field over two soundstages and every tree had been designed by a different person. It was just amazing. The scale of it all was just really great. It's always gonna be easier acting in front of the thing you're supposed to be seeing rather than a green tennis ball.

What's it like working with so many legends every day?

★ I won't deny it was a very "pinch me" incredible experience. Also the best teaching you could ever get. Drama school's an amazing thing, but there's nothing like learning off Patti LuPone every day for six months. She has skill and ability and charisma and everything more than anyone could ever imagine. I almost felt like I wanted to get out a notepad and pen and just write down everything that everyone was doing and the way that they worked.

What other "pinch me" moments stand out?

★ There's definitely two pinch me moments that stand out – one I can't talk about and the other would be when we first got on the road set. It was the first time it really sunk in because this set was huge and it was very expensive and gorgeous. I was realising, "Oh, this isn't kids' play any more." I remember Jac giving me a hug and I just couldn't stop crying.

I came over all emotional and then she gave me a hug and squeezed me and then said, "It was always you, Joe." Then I just couldn't stop crying for another half an hour. It was a really, really, really amazing moment to hear that from her, who is someone that I look up to very much.

“He’s living his dream, being able to be part of a coven and go on the Witches’ Road”

PORTRAIT BY GIZELLE HERNANDEZ

MEET PATTI LUPONE'S LILIA CALDERU

What attracted you to this new world of Marvel witches?

★ I play a Sicilian witch. When they came to me, I was, like "Wow", because I am Sicilian. And I do think I am a witch. I have precognisance. I've had it all my life, I know something's going to happen before it happens. I've always wanted to check myself into the Duke Institute of Parapsychology, just to see how far I could go with that stuff. That's an element of what old white men back in the day would have considered witchery. It's something that's cosmic, it's something of the Earth. I'm in tune to some energy, some universal energy. So if that is something that is branded a witch, I'm all in.

What does your character particularly bring to the coven?

★ The most I can probably say is confusion. If you're watching the episodes, you'll know what I'm talking about. I can't even tell you what her particular power is, but it manifests itself later on in the episodes. You don't really know what's going on with her [at first]. You don't know what she's saying, neither do the other witches. They think that because I am the oldest, I'm the dottiest.

You were the first to reveal that this has musical elements. A witch musical, Patti LuPone... it's never been an easier sell.

★ First of all, Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez wrote the song, so it's fantastic. Then, I'm an ensemble player, I am a member of a chorus. I started out when I was a kid in choruses. There's something about that sound, the melding of voices. So I was thrilled – and the girls, all of them can sing. I don't know whether any of us actually knew initially that there would be a song. I mean, it's incredible. It was great fun in the studio. It was great fun at dinner after.

What was your experience working with Joe Locke?

★ My god, he's the most self-possessed guy at his age that I have ever met. I've been through the wars in this business and I like to caution young kids that are starting in the business what to watch out for. I watched the way he negotiated certain things, and this kid knows exactly what he needs, how to protect himself. He's the loveliest human being, and he didn't need any counsel from me.

I am so impressed with him, his talents. I mean, this was his second job. *Heartstopper* was his first, Marvel was the second. He's been thrown into the mega circle, right at the top of it. To watch him negotiate that was very impressive. I'm thrilled for him. I love him dearly. I know that he will be incredibly successful, and he's just a great human being.

DIA DIPASUPIL/GETTY

"The writers had their perspectives on how we tell stories in a way that's authentic"

PORTRAIT BY GIZELLE HERNANDEZ

Jennifer, Teen, Agatha, Lilia, Mrs Hart and Alice.

Continued from page 29...

Agatha: House Of Harkness, then *Agatha: Coven Of Chaos*, and, at one point, *Agatha: The Lying Witch With Great Wardrobe*.

"It was an idea in the writers' room that tickled us," Schaeffer says. "We had 20 titles that were just so silly. It was born of the idea of how meddlesome Agatha is in a behind-the-scenes kind of way. I was a little bit horrified when people thought some of the titles were real!"

Mischief, then, collides with the other, quintessential Agathaisms: new songs from Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, practical sets and miniatures, iconic gothic silhouettes provided by costume designer Daniel Selon, and horror of both the campy and gruesome variety.

"That was another question of, we're not doing a season two of *WandaVision*, we're doing a spin-off," says the showrunner. "How do we carry that DNA with us without retreading the same things?"

Agatha is the witch as all she can be, capable of good and bad, empowered and disenfranchised, fierce and wounded. Her series, rightfully, is about the beautiful things that can happen when outsiders find strength in each other.

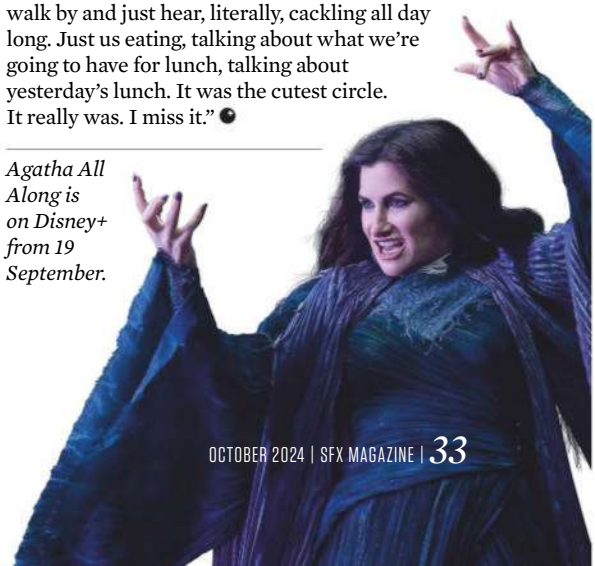
Locke's character, whoever he may be, has been confirmed as gay. "From the writers' room through to department heads, it's about the creatives in front of the camera and behind the camera representing the storylines of the characters on screen," Schaeffer says. "Joe Locke is an extraordinary member of the community. I stand in awe of his grace. The writers had their perspectives on how we tell stories in a way that is authentic.

"Minimal angst is really one of the pieces of it. It's my certainty that the people involved in the show, that their voices were loud and listened to, and I hope that's reflected on screen."

"We're all witches," Hahn says. "[Joe] is totally a witch as well. We had this little coven. We put our set chairs in a circle. You would walk by and just hear, literally, cackling all day long. Just us eating, talking about what we're going to have for lunch, talking about yesterday's lunch. It was the cutest circle. It really was. I miss it."

Agatha All Along is on Disney+ from 19 September.

Aubrey Plaza as Rio Vidal (second from left).



RULE OF THE BAT

GOTHAM'S UP FOR GRABS IN BRUISING NEW CRIME SAGA **THE PENGUIN**... BUT WHERE IS THE BATMAN?

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

OZ COBB IS A MAN WITH A VISION.

His own show, how does that sound? Real sweet, right? One of them classy HBO numbers, the kind that scores Emmys. Eight episodes – long form drama, they call it – all about his rise to top dog in this rat-heap of a town. A Gotham gangster epic to make Tony Soprano look like a penny-ante schmuck.

Yeah, put the spotlight on Oz, where it belongs. A shot at respect at last. No chance of that mook with the bat-ears or that double-dealin' cat-dame stealin' his screen time. It's his show. Number one on the call sheet. Name in the title, baby. *The Penguin*! Sure, it's a little insultin', but it's got a ring to it, right?

But listen. Every nickel-and-dime dreamer's got a vision on these streets. To make it in TV you need contacts. Get one of them fancy Tinseltown types in your corner. Creatives, is that the word? Maybe that Matt Reeves guy. He seems connected. Real legit. Why not lean on him? Call in a favour...

"I was doing my deep dive into the comics," remembers Reeves, director and co-writer of 2022's *The Batman*, a brooding, visceral big-screen take on the Dark Knight and his crime-stained city. "I thought, 'Oh, once this world is established it might be really interesting to go off the main path, in order to tell stories about the characters that are in the movies or related to the movies but aren't the Batman.

"These movies are very much telling the story of Batman's emotional arc, and the story is his point of view. Because they're mystery stories we're learning about other characters as they're involved in the detective story, so we're learning about them through him. A lot of times what happens is you establish the Batman in the first movie and then the next movie is the Riddler's movie or the Joker's movie and the rogues' gallery takes centre stage. I wanted to find a way to keep Batman as the central arc of the movies."

"Once we were making the movie we realised we were really putting the Batman at the heart of the film and developing this character in a very in-depth psychological way," says Dylan Clark, Reeves's producing partner. "It became clear that we could take the other characters and do the same kind of thing inside a limited series, because HBO is such a quality place."

Initial plans for a TV spin-off focused on the thin blue line of the Gotham City Police Department, a proposal ultimately shelved in favour of a Penguin-centric saga. "As I was talking to the network," Reeves recalls, "they were saying, 'Hey, in these series, which we are really excited about, we would love you to lean into one of these marquee characters.'"

GANGSTER'S PARADISE

With a comic book legacy spanning over 80 years and some memorable screen appearances, from Burgess Meredith's squawking, monocled dandy in the 1960s Batman TV show to Danny DeVito's bile-dripping ghoul in 1992's *Batman Returns*, the Penguin certainly has brand recognition.

The Batman stripped away the character's more outlandish trappings to present a grounded, street-level menace – goodbye, bird-themed heists, adios, flame-throwing brollies.

Played by Colin Farrell, unrecognisable beneath astonishing, Oscar-nominated make-up, Oz Cobb was proprietor of mob hang-out the Iceberg Lounge and right hand heavy to soon-to-be-slain crime tsar Carmine Falcone. Dismissed by Lt James Gordon as a "minor league mope", this gold-toothed low life was a man consumed with ambition. →

COBB ON

What's in a name?

While the Penguin's true name has traditionally been Oswald Chesterfield Cobblepot, he's the distinctly less whimsical Oz Cobb in Matt Reeves's Batman universe.

"They never got around to changing his name in the comics like they did with the Riddler, going from Edward Nigma to Edward Nashton, from an unreal name to a real name," says producer Dylan Clark. "By doing that they grounded the character.

"We had a lot of conversations with DC Comics and with Jim Lee [President, Publisher and Chief Creative Officer]. They had thought about changing his name at some point but had never done it. Matt asked, 'Can I call our character Oz Cobb?' And Jim said, 'Absolutely!' So we got a blessing from the king himself. That small change of the name allowed us to look at this character in a grounded way."

"Matt's created new canon in his film, and I'm creating new canon in this show," adds writer and showrunner Lauren LeFranc. "We have characters you're familiar with but there's a different spin on them.

"It felt like in the Gotham City that Matt created in his film, Cobblepott seemed less of a real person in the way that Cobb is a real last name. He's a gangster and it just kind of felt more correct."

Clancy Brown as Salvatore Maroni meets Oz Cobb.

Sofia Falcone (Cristin Milioti), a complicated broad.

STOCK ART: NICK VEASEY/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY: GETTY

And Reeves had plans for him to fulfil that ambition. "What I told Colin at the time is that after what happens to Falcone there's going to be this power vacuum, and the thing about your version of the Penguin is everyone thinks he's a joke to a degree. They underestimate him. Meanwhile he has this coiled ambition inside him. He is going to grab for power, and I see that as being one of the core aspects of the next movie.

"So I said to the network I was going to do an almost *Scarface* gangster story about a rise to power, that was really going to be an examination of what was inside Oz, what was driving him, what lack inside of him drove this voracious need for power. Literally on the call they were like, 'Oh, that's the show! We want to do that show!'"

"Matt's words – and I love this phraseology – is that the movie vibrates against the show and the show vibrates against the movie," adds Clark. "They inform each other. You don't need to watch the movie in order to enjoy the show. I just think it enriches it. They are connected."

The Penguin picks up barely a week after the events of *The Batman*. Gotham is recovering from the flood unleashed by the Riddler in the film's apocalyptic climax. As the city threatens to fracture still further, its poorest neighbourhoods suffering even as its well-heeled mobsters scramble to claim power, Oz Cobb plots his ascent to kingpin of the underworld – Emperor Penguin, no less.

> **"I wanted to make sure that he was charming, despite how despicable he could be"**

It's an arc that immediately appealed to writer and showrunner Lauren LeFranc. "What I really connected with Matt about was the idea that it would be a character study," she tells *SFX*, "a psychological study of this man who's very complicated and dark in some ways but who also feels like a timely representation of a lot of people in our world right now, for better or worse.

"I started to dig deeper in and figure out what I could bring to it that would be personal, and why they would reach out to someone like me, because traditionally I'm not the first person you'd think of to write a crime drama about a middle-aged gangster who's very violent!

"What I really appreciated about what Matt was doing in his depiction of Oz [in *The Batman*] is that he was a man. He was a mobster, and a complicated gangster, and violent and larger than life in the way that mobsters are, but he's a man, and that felt like something I could connect to. I wanted to make sure that he was charming, despite how despicable he could be, and I wanted to make sure that he didn't feel one-note, or just a quote-unquote villain, which is not anything I would be interested in telling. He had to feel like a real person."

As LeFranc reveals, she found an unlikely true-life inspiration. "Buddy Cianci was the Mayor of Providence, Rhode Island for 21 years. I went to university in Providence, and when I was there he was this sort of folklore figure. He was in prison and people were wearing shirts that said 'Free Buddy', because they loved him so much.

"He was in prison because he was very corrupt. He was involved in money laundering and he had a violent streak. He assaulted people who had wronged him and yet the community loved him because he revitalised

WAYNE'S WORLD

Batman's big-screen future

"The plan is to shoot next year, and we're finishing up the script now," says Matt Reeves of *The Batman: Part II*, the sequel to his hardboiled 2022 take on the Dark Knight. "Colin [Farrell] will be part of the movie. We've shared [the script] as we've been going along with DC and the studio and they're super excited."

As Reeves reveals to *SFX*, *The Penguin* will serve as a bridge between the two movies. "Our entry point is absolutely connected to where we leave things in the series. There are details that actually connect right into the way the next movie begins, and the way that Oz enters that world as we hand the baton back to Batman, and Batman is on another case.

"I would like these stories to be a meditation on the way Gotham is the way it is. It's such a brutal place and we're digging for the answers as to why these people's lives are this way. It's another mystery [in *The Batman: Part II*] that's going to dig into the epic story about deeper corruption and it goes into places that he couldn't even anticipate in the first one. The seeds of where this goes are all in the first movie, and it expands in a way that will show you aspects of the character you never got to see.

"Batman is constantly battling these forces. But those forces can't be entirely exorcised. So the next movie delves deeper into that."

Reeves has established a gritty, realistic tone for Batman's adventures. So no chance of Robert Pattinson fighting one of the more fantastical foes like the Gentleman Ghost?

"You'll see the Gentleman Ghost in *Batman: Caped Crusader* from Bruce Timm but you won't see him in this!" laughs Reeves. "What was important to me was to find a way to take these pop icons, these mythic characters that everybody knows, and translate it so that Gotham feels like a place in our world. We might push to the edge of the fantastical but we would never go into full fantastical. It's meant to feel quite grounded.

"It doesn't mean that you won't see characters that people love. That's exactly what we want to do. Gentleman Ghost is probably pushed a bit too far for us to be able to find a way to do, but there is a fun way to think about how we would take characters that might push over into a bit of the fantastical and find a way to make sense of that."

Nice weather for penguins! Oh, sorry, Oz. No offence.

the city, and he had a good sense of humour. He would just say wild things and he was weirdly loveable, even though he was really problematic. I was like, 'Well, that's Oz!' So that opened the door into my perspective and how I started to think about Oz."

The series shows us a deeply human Penguin. The waddling gait, played for laughs in previous incarnations, is revealed to be the result of a club foot, exposed in a heartbreakingly empathic moment in episode one. Tiny illuminations like a love for Slush Puppies and an appreciation of Dolly Parton exist alongside a heavy mother-son relationship and an ever-itchy trigger finger.

Is it a challenge, keeping the audience onside with your protagonist while never letting them forget just how skeevy and downright dangerous he is?

"It's something I'm very conscious of," admits LeFranc. "Obviously Colin is so likeable and charming. I'm not trying to get you to like him, but to understand him. So coming at him from a place of empathy is important. The beauty of having eight episodes is that you get to unpack this person more, to see more deeply who he really is and what makes him tick, and that's something that's very important to me. I hope by the end of the series you don't find him as likeable as you do at the beginning. My goal was not to make excuses for him."

Scott Cohen plays Luca Falcone...

...and Carmen Ejogo plays Eve Karlo.

Looks like Sofia's in trouble...

"When you talk about humanising the character of course it's in the writing but really Colin Farrell is incredible," Reeves tells *SFX*. "What Mike Marino did with the make-up was an incredible magic trick, but truthfully under that it kind of freed [Colin]. He's so human, you see his darkness, he's so funny.

"I just think he is truly a powerhouse. His performance over the course of this series is extraordinary and I think people are really going to be blown away by him."

LeFranc remembers the first time she met Farrell on-set, submerged beneath Marino's prosthetics, which take inspiration from wounded birds to conjure Cobb's features.→

“As a writer, I don’t think of Colin Farrell playing a character. I think of Oz”

“It was wild. He seemed taller and bigger than I imagined. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Colin. I’m sure it’s weird, because a lot of people just stared at him, curious, trying to see if there were seams in the make-up. He completely transformed.

“If you talk to any of us who interacted with Oz, you would get that he seemed like a different person. We know he’s Colin, so he’s a gentle giant off-camera, but it’s like he’s his own man. As a writer, I don’t think of Colin Farrell playing a character. I think of Oz, and he feels like a real person to me, which is very strange. Colin transforms in an incredible way.

“He and I talked all the time about Oz, as a character, and we would bond about how we were both inside this man. Obviously Colin was literally inside of him, in the prosthetics and the body suit, and then mentally as well. He was a great collaborator. Mike Marino is equally that, because he created Oz’s face, and without Mike there would be no Oz.”

LITTLE BIRD

As Oz manoeuvres himself into place for a power grab he enlists a protégé: tenement kid Victor Aguilar, played by Rhenzy Feliz. “Batman gets Robin,” smiles LeFranc. “Doesn’t Oz deserve his own Boy Wonder? Obviously Victor’s not a Boy Wonder – he’s different and deeper than that – but that was the early machinations of how I conceived of him.

“I think of Victor as the heart of our show in a lot of ways. Seeing Oz as a mentor helped us unlock doors to who this man is. Victor really is our way in as an audience to Oz.”

Opposing the Penguin’s capture of the criminal throne is a character transplanted from the comic books, Sofia Falcone aka Hangman, only daughter of Carmine, played with restrained menace by *How I Met Your Mother*’s Cristin Milioti.

“When I was younger and reading comic books, or watching crime dramas, I just wished for female characters that weren’t always there,” says LeFranc. “I gravitated to the male characters because they were more interesting and had more depth and were complicated.

“So when I thought about my version of Sofia I just wanted to give my younger self... not someone to look up to, because Sofia is complicated and not a quote-unquote good person, but someone who’s really dynamic and flawed and interesting as a good adversary to Oz.

“I liked the idea that Oz, because of his mother, respected women. He sees Sofia as an equal, in a way. He’s very intimidated by her and he respects her and her intelligence. Even though they’re very different and come from different worlds they’re cut from the same cloth. Cristin is incredible. She has that rare quality as an actor where she’s known for comedy, so has incredible comedic timing, but she is full of depth and has great drama chops. This felt perfect for her, in that she can do both, and she can really poke at Oz in a unique way.”

Sofia can clinch or kill as needed.

Everyone just loves being in Gotham.

Francis Cobb (Deirdre O’Connell).

One major player appears to be missing in action. Gotham may be forever in his avenging shadow but the Dark Knight, it seems, is sitting this one out (rumours that Robert Pattinson may suit-up for a cameo may be a reliable underworld whisper – or simply fervent fan-wishing).

What does that do to your storytelling, taking Batman out of Batman’s world? “I understand why people’s desire would be to have Batman, or to think that unless Batman’s in a show or a film then it doesn’t have the same punch,” says LeFranc. “To me I think it packs a different punch. Matt’s films are through the lens of the Batman, so you’re

Colin Farrell deep in character – and make-up.

high up, looking down on the city. It's a different perspective. With Oz, you're in the city streets, you're in the grit and the muck and the grime. He's looking up, wanting to claw his way to the top.

"So it's a different experience. I think Gotham is an interesting enough city that it deserves to have more doors unlocked within it, and for us to walk through those and see what we think."

"I don't feel like it's missing something fundamental," says Reeves, clearly feeling no pressure to flash the Bat-signal. "I feel like it's an extension of what is fundamentally there. We know this is the world of Batman.

"You're going down a different alley. So the spectre of Batman is there. The spectre of the Riddler is there. The spectre of everything that happens in the last movie is there. It informs it. And it's exactly where we begin."

The Penguin is on Sky Atlantic and NOW from 20 September.

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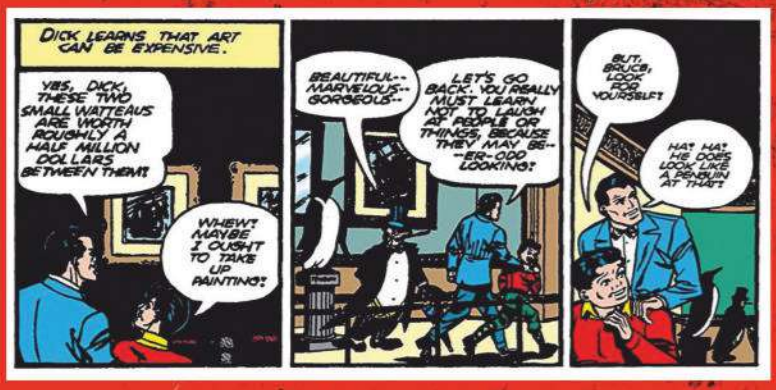
PENGUIN CLASSICS

The bird man of Gotham


DICK LEARNS THAT ART CAN BE EXPENSIVE.
YES, DICK, THESE TWO SMALL WATTEAUS ARE WORTH ROUGHLY A HALF MILLION DOLLARS BETWEEN THEM!
WHEW! MAYBE I OUGHT TO TAKE UP PAINTING!
BEAUTIFUL-- MARVELOUS-- GORGEOUS--
LET'S GO BACK. YOU REALLY MUST LEARN NOT TO LAUGH AT PEOPLE OR THINGS, BECAUSE THEY MAY BE-- --ER--GOD LOOKING!
BUT, BRUCE, LOOK FOR YOURSELF!
HA! HA! HE DOES LOOK LIKE A PENGUIN AT THAT!

The Penguin debuted in *Detective Comics* 58 (cover-dated December 1941) in the story "One Of The Most Perfect Frame-Ups".

He's the creation of Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Kane said he was inspired by Willie, the brand mascot of Kool cigarettes, a penguin in a top hat.

Other inspiration may have come from Broadway Bates, a suspiciously similar-looking crook in the *Dick Tracy* strip, first seen in 1932. In 2012 he was revealed to have a brother called Oswald...

The Penguin's notorious trick umbrellas have unleashed bullets, acid, sleeping gas, poison darts and "liquid fire". One transformed into a one-man "umbrella-copter".

Burgess Meredith played him in the *Batman* TV show. A non-smoker, Meredith created the trademark quack to cover up coughing on cigarette smoke during takes.

In 1968 Meredith made an uncredited Penguin cameo in *The Monkees*, shown on a rival network.

While Danny DeVito played him in 1992's *Batman Returns*, other stars reportedly considered included Dustin Hoffman, Bob Hoskins, Christopher Lloyd and Joe Pesci.

In *Batman: The Animated Series*, the Penguin was voiced by singer-songwriter Paul Williams, the man who wrote "Rainy Days And Mondays".

Robin Lord Taylor played a young version of the Penguin in TV show *Gotham*.

In 1978 Corgi Toys released a diecast Penguinmobile. It didn't sell as well as the Batmobile... Awk!

BRING OUT

YOUR DEAD

THE GHOST WITH THE MOST RETURNS – FINALLY – IN BEETLEJUICE BEETLEJUICE

WORDS: **DANIEL KRUPA**

ALMOST 40 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE Beetlejuice was eaten by a sandworm on his wedding day. For a long time it felt like it would be his last appearance on the big screen, which always felt... odd.

After all, Tim Burton's movie was a huge hit back in 1988, and work on a sequel began immediately – one infamous draft saw Beetlejuice move to Hawaii and enter an undead surfing contest – but nothing ever materialised, on film at least. There were four seasons of an animated show, a couple of minor videogame appearances, and most recently a short-lived musical on Broadway. By modern standards, that's a meagre offering for such a beloved character.

But it's finally happening, and the task of resurrecting the character and exploring his strange and unusual world in *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* has fallen to the seasoned writing partnership of Alfred Gough and Miles Millar. The pair recently experienced tremendous success creating Netflix's mega-hit *Wednesday*, which Burton also worked on as a director and executive producer.

In fact, it was during production on the show's first season that Burton invited the pair to his trailer late one night to talk about a certain bio-exorcist. That conversation →

Michael Keaton with director Tim Burton.

Delores is played by Monica Bellucci.

quickly turned into an invitation to Burton's apartment in Bucharest. Unlike other attempts to revive the character, this one gathered momentum rapidly.

"He told us the ideas he wanted in the movie," Gough remembers of those initial meetings. "We went off, crafted a story, did an outline, came back to him, and pitched it. He really liked it. Then we pitched it to Warner Bros. It happened *very* quickly."

LIFE AFTER THE AFTERLIFE

Despite Burton and star Michael Keaton being on board, the real challenge for Gough and Millar was still ahead. How do you revive a series that's been dormant for four decades? Fortunately the pair have vast experience working on iconic characters – they penned the story to Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* and created *Smallville* – but usually those types of characters command vast bodies of work to draw upon for inspiration. Beetlejuice's "canon" amounts to 92 minutes of film. But that slight runtime quickly became their handbook.

"As soon as we had that conversion with Tim, we went back and watched the movie," Millar says of the initial stages. "We tried to figure out what were all the essential ingredients of the first film that you'd want to see in a sequel, and how would they be different?

"It's an iconic movie – a classic – but also very much an '80s movie. So how do we make this film feel contemporary and have a reason to be? That's always the thing about a sequel. Why should it exist rather than just for commerce? For us, it has to be about character and say something about the world."

Despite being the main attraction – indeed, at one point, he literally transforms himself into a fairground attraction – the character of Beetlejuice has just 17 minutes of screentime in the original movie.

"I think that's the trap that you could fall into," points out Gough. "You want to make Beetlejuice the lead, and he's not. He's literally the antagonist, an agent of chaos, who comes into the story. The movie's called *Beetlejuice*, right? So I think there is always that instinct to try to do that, but we very much tried to stay true to the original."

"Tim is very conscious of that too," Millar adds. "We just kept paring Beetlejuice back. He's a great character to write, but a little goes a long way. So when he *is* on screen, he makes a lot more impact. It's really choosing the moments and really making those special."

"When you meet him, I guess you could say Beetlejuice is in a bit of a midlife crisis," says Gough. "He's settled into middle age and middle management for the afterlife.

"He's a guy trying to keep his bio-exorcist business going, but he's lost a little of his excitement and passion for it, but through the course of this movie he regains his anarchic self. Part of his life has gotten dreary, but he's never let go of his feelings for Lydia. She definitely made an impression."

As they rewatched the original, Lydia left an impression on Gough and Millar, too. What

Willem Dafoe as Wolf Jackson (right).

Winona Ryder returns from the original as Lydia.

Jenna Ortega as Astrid with screen mum Winona Ryder.

STOCK IMAGES: TIGERSTRAWBERRY, NATALIA KOLOSOVA, ANKUR MONDAL, FABIANZURHEIDEPHOTOGRAPHY, DRAKONOVA/GETTY

Beetlejuice and his pin-headed pal: not happy.

Delia (Catherine O'Hara) is in bad company.

little plot there is turns on the young goth's ability to perceive the undead, positioning her as a conduit between worlds. Despite falling prey to Beetlejuice's unhinged affections, the movie concludes on an optimistic note for Lydia. She's become part of a very progressive family unit composed of her actual (living) parents and a set of adopted (dead) parents in the Maitlands, who always wanted to have children but never could.

As the credits roll, her dead "parents" reward her getting an A in her maths test by allowing her to perform ghost karaoke with backing vocals from a team of college football players who died in a traffic accident. It's wholesome but, when unpacked, deeply weird.

"She's had this ability for 30-plus years," says Gough. "What does that do to her? What is her relationship with Catherine [O'Hara, who plays Lydia's mother Delia]? What is her relationship with her own daughter who is like her? So it's these three generations of women living in this house, and to us that was like, 'Oh, this is really what it is. It's a movie about these women.'"

So while Beetlejuice looms over the sequel, like he does in the original, the focus this time is on the three generations of Deetz women. Millar is particularly enthusiastic about the introduction of Jenna Ortega's Astrid (Lydia's daughter), who will act as a way into this deeply bizarre world for the uninitiated.

"You see this movie and learn about this world through the eyes of Astrid," explains Millar. "It feels like this is a book that stands alone. It works without the first. It is a sequel, so all those elements and Easter eggs are there, but you have to lay it out without expectations of people knowing the first."

GREATEST HITS

Haunting *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* is the problem faced by any legacy sequel: a belated follow-up to a beloved property, less burdened by years of continuity from multiple instalments (think *Top Gun: Maverick* or *Twisters*). How do you satisfy the nostalgic cravings of fans, while resisting the urge to play the greatest hits?

The original's "Day-O" scene is a great example. Despite not featuring Beetlejuice, it's probably the movie's most memorable moment. It involves a haunted dinner party, in which the Deetzs's guests are possessed and compelled to sing Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat Song". To this day, it remains (probably) the only occurrence of a haunted prawn cocktail in cinema. But its popularity establishes an expectation.

Millar knew audiences would sit down expecting something similar. "We needed a musical number. 'Day-O' was an amazing set-piece in the middle of the movie, which is iconic. So figuring out how to top that, in a way that didn't feel repetitive but felt organic to the movie, was really a challenge.

"That was something we wrestled with until the end with Tim. I think people are expecting something like that, but how do we do it in a way that's unexpected? That's always the challenge when you do a sequel. You want it to have the ingredients but feel like a new recipe."

Gough restates the dilemma: "It's honouring it without being fan service." He's aware of the elements you need to repeat to create a connection with the original, but believes there's also space within them to innovate and surprise fans of the original. "You have the book [*Handbook For The Recently Deceased*]. You need to have the waiting room. We talked about a case agent, but we found a different way to explore the world without a case agent, which is the character played by Willem Dafoe.

"And what would happen if you broke the rules of the afterlife? So that was also something that became an interesting story point and narrative thread that we explored, and gave us access to other areas of bureaucratic hell."

When you think about it, *Beetlejuice* has all the right ingredients for a perfect legacy sequel. It's iconic but not overexposed, blessed with a unique but largely unexplored world. There's so much that could be done. So despite it taking 36 years for this sequel to be made, given Hollywood's reliance upon the familiar, is it possible we might not have to wait so long again to see more Beetlejuice?

Gough and Millar certainly recognise the potential. "We haven't had those conversations yet," says Gough. "I think everybody's been focused on this movie, but I think if this movie is a success, those conversations will inevitably happen."

"People love this world," adds Millar. "People love this character, Beetlejuice. Yes, there's certainly room to explore it." But when asked if that could be done without the titular agent of chaos, Millar seems less sure. "The tone is something that can be explored through other characters. But it's called *Beetlejuice* for a reason. I think it's an open book in terms of what you could do. It's just picking a direction to take it and what's the story to tell."

> **"When you meet him, I guess you could say Beetlejuice is in a bit of a midlife crisis"**

Talk of legacy sequels and expanding worlds can feel crass, but thankfully that's never the impression you get from listening to Gough and Millar talk about their experience with Burton. For them it finally happened because Burton and Keaton wanted to play in this world again. "It really is Tim's ultimate fan response," adds Millar. "I think he'd be horrified about me saying that. But it's true...

"I think what's been amazing to watch is Tim's reconnection with comedy. I've never seen anyone be more adept at physical or visual gags. I think *Wednesday* set that alight, and it really comes home in *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*."

Beetlejuice Beetlejuice is in cinemas from 6 September.

SILENT KILLERS

THE DIRECTOR OF HOLLYWOOD'S SPEAK NO EVIL REMAKE ON HORROR, COMEDY AND JAMES MCAVOY

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

"THERE'S NO POINT REMAKING A MOVIE that works on its own." No, that's not a quote from an angry YouTuber complaining about how Hollywood has run out of ideas, which is why it's remaking the exquisitely tense Dutch horror *Speak No Evil*. Instead, those are the words of James Watkins, the writer and director behind the upcoming American retread. "[Director] Christian [Tafdrup]'s film works brilliantly," Watkins says. "It's incredibly uncompromising in following through its thesis to its end. There's just no point remaking it. I thought, 'Well, I can have a conversation with that movie.'"

The original *Speak No Evil*'s premise is devilishly simple: a happy Danish family go on holiday in Tuscany, where they are befriended by another family. Once back home, the Danes accept an invitation to the other family's house in the remote Dutch countryside, only to gradually realise that →

these people are not who they seem. It's a tension-filled, slow-burn horror that examines how so many of us are afraid to break normal social cues, to the point where we can end up suffering unnecessarily just to stay polite. Tafdrup's film, though, takes this to a more deadly extreme.

Watkins transposes the action to the English countryside. An unhappily married American couple – played by Mackenzie Davis and Scoot McNairy – along with their daughter, Alix West Lefler's Agnes, visit their mysterious, charming new friends from Gloucestershire, portrayed with charismatic, bone-chilling excellence by James McAvoy and Aisling Franciosi. They, too, have a child in Dan Hough's Ant, though he can't speak because his tongue didn't grow properly when he was born.

Horror studio Blumhouse is behind the remake and had been searching for the right filmmaker to take on the project when executive producer Couper Samuelson approached Watkins about the idea, having enjoyed his bleak 2008 horror *Eden Lake*, starring Kelly Reilly and Michael Fassbender.

RULES OF THE GAME

"I didn't know the original *Speak No Evil*," Watkins says. "I watched it and it's a strong brew. It's pretty uncompromising, and not dissimilar to *Eden Lake* in terms of how it's unrelenting and the ending is completely, bleakly unrelenting. I really loved the movie and I thought I could treat it in my own way."

If you're familiar with the original, then you know the movie's twists and turns, though you may be surprised by the way things unfold in Watkins's version. "The third act and how it builds into the third act are different," he says.

"I developed these characters with the same notions of masculinity, how the women behave, exploring those social rules – it's similar, but we were taking them deeper, leaning more into the humour, so there's more light and more shade. I thought, 'Okay, this can be a social dramedy that slowly percolates and comes to the boil in a Sam Peckinpah movie at the end.'"

Indeed, the remake's finale is much more Hollywood than the original, climaxing in what could almost be classed as a shoot-out. "In terms of my characters, who are faced with a live or die situation, they're going to try something, whether it's to run or to hide or to fight back," Watkins says. "I didn't want my characters to just surrender. Nor did I want them to become Navy SEALs. They are just terrified."

The movie never goes too out of sync with the original – it simply follows the natural arc of these versions of the characters and what they're going through in their lives. For instance, the original Bjørn is a passive male, while McNairy's Ben feels even more disenfranchised. Both have lost their way, and both are unable to break from ordinary social cues.

"We've all been in that situation, you're at a party, someone behaves like a dickhead, and you go home and you say to your wife, 'I wish I'd said something to him about the way he was behaving,'" Watkins says. "Often you never do. We're constrained by the social rules.

"I thought, 'Well, the social rules are there for a reason.' About 60 minutes in when the family learns what's going on, they try and use the social rules. They try to polite their way out. Then at some point, the social rules break down and we're faced with confrontation. How do we react?

"There'll be people that see the original movie and go, 'Why hasn't he remade that movie? Why hasn't he made this incredibly punchy, unrelenting ending?' But I would argue, with my characters and their journey, I'm following through their journey in terms of agency and how they would react. What I've taken from Christian's film is the satire, the exploration of the social rules, and how we react."

One major difference Watkins is keen to stress is that his version is not as bleak as the original. "I've made an incredibly bleak movie before, so I didn't feel I needed to make another one," he says. "You can give people an incredibly tense roller coaster ride that has thematic nourishment and things to take away and talk about in the pub, but it can be fun.

"People need fun... Fun in inverted commas. I've sat with audiences and people come out of this absolutely rinsed, like you would on a great roller coaster ride. I wanted to make a film that is tense and has people screaming at the screen."

To create that roller coaster feeling while keeping the film a slow burn, Watkins relies on a mixture of constantly escalating tension and humour. "The process of finding that takes quite a lot of calibration," he explains. "Some of the material I loved the most is not in the movie. Jon Harris, the editor, and I were very ruthless about killing our darlings. It was like, 'We love this, but it's not advancing story enough, so it becomes indulgent.' The humour is part of the joy of the ride. I didn't want to make a grim, relentless movie.

"When I started in the '90s in the UK, 'commercial' was such a dirty word, but the two things, commercial and art, can coexist. The filmmakers I like the most – Chris Nolan, Alfonso Cuarón – they just understand that the two things have to coexist. That's hopefully what we aspire to do."

Much of the humour and the tension comes from McAvoy's Paddy. Watkins describes him as an almost Trump-like character, someone who appeals to a certain type of man who feels let down by society.

"There's a reason that these maverick demagogue characters have success, and it's because they are fun," he says. "They say, 'I'm the guy who's going to tear up the rules.' The Devil has all the best tunes."

McAvoy was the first person Watkins contacted about the role and was immediately

Dan Hough, Aisling Franciosi and James McAvoy.

Alix West Lefler, Mackenzie Davis and Scoot McNairy.

Ciara's had just about blummin' well enough.

STOCK ART: LUCKY_GUY/JULIA SOLODUKHINA/GETTY

Paddy is indeed having a bit of a paddy.

> **When I started in the '90s in the UK, 'commercial' was such a dirty word**

interested ("When people say this in interviews, it's never true, they usually get to number seven," he laughs). The pair began talking deeply about themes and social rules and how these terrifying demagogues come to be mentors.

"James does his classical theatre, he's been Macbeth and Iago. But we were both trying to make the same movie here. James wants to make an entertaining film, he's not precious, and I want to make a film that people can go and have a really fucking good time in the cinema. I like the fact that we can lean into these themes and there's some nourishment there. It's not just clockwork."

It's no surprise that McAvoy's superb in the role, but what did shock Watkins was the brilliance of Hough, who plays the young Ant. "Little Dan had never acted before professionally," he says. "When we screen-tested him, I thought he had something, but then I surrounded him with people, because half the battle of acting is you need to act in front of people. I can't walk in front of a movie camera without my walk turning funny, I just become self-conscious. We screen-tested him with Ant's scream at the end of the film and he lost his voice for about three days, but he was so raw.

"When the very final shot of the film came, the first take wasn't where I wanted it to be and we had a conversation. The second take is what's in the movie. The other cast came around the monitor afterwards and Mackenzie and James were like, 'Oh my lord, I knew it was good but...' He was so in the moment. Everything was encapsulated in that final image. It was one of those magic moments of being on a film set."

Sounds like there was a point to remaking *Speak No Evil* after all...

Speak No Evil is in cinemas from 13 September.

ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY...

James Watkins on the importance of setting *Speak No Evil* in the English countryside

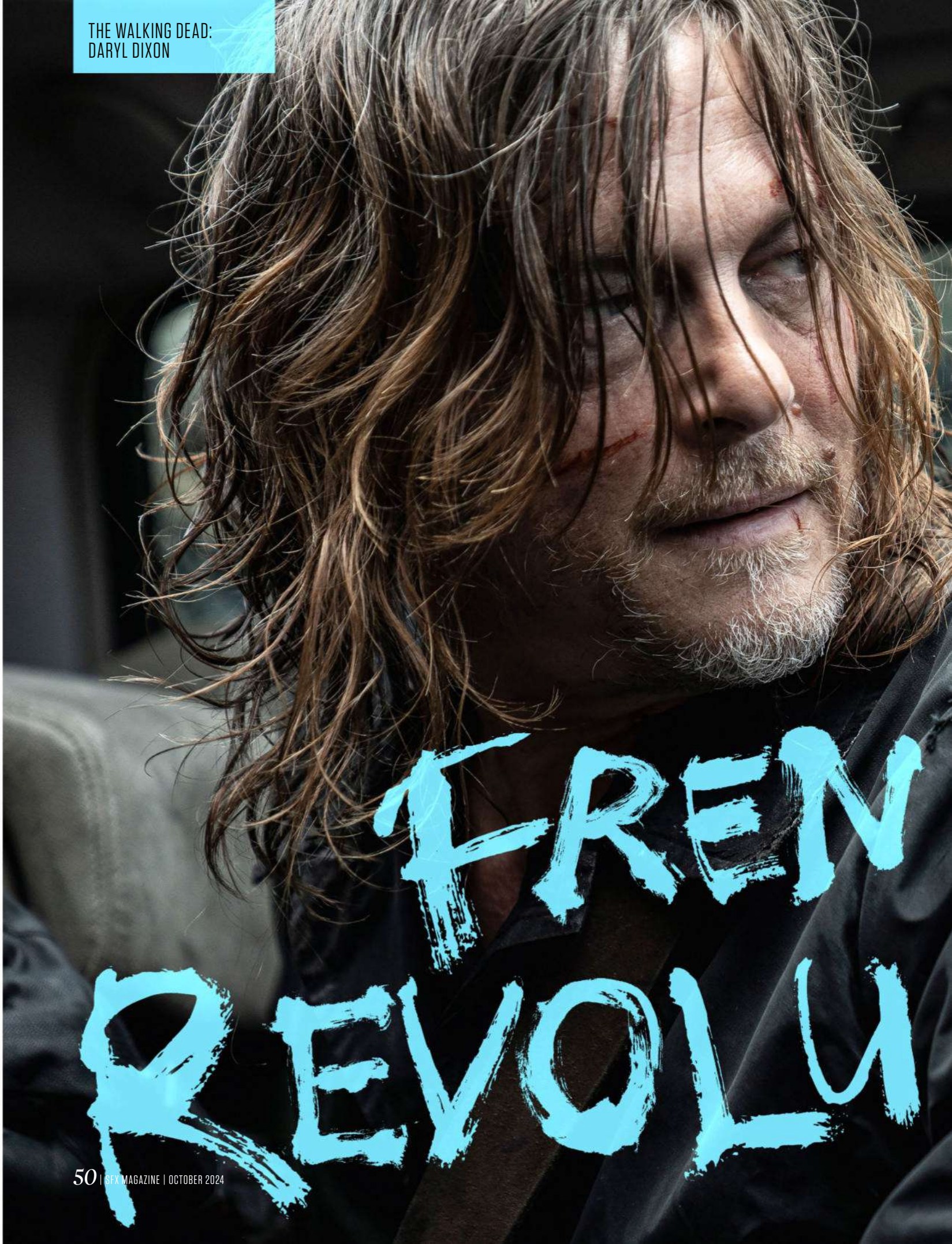
"I feel really passionately about this because Americans are brilliant at anthologising their landscapes, whether it's New York or movies in the Grand Canyon. This country – we never do, and we have such brilliant landscapes with brilliant history. I wanted to lean into that notion of landscape.

"James Price, our production designer, who just won an Oscar for *Poor Things*, he grew up on a farm in Herefordshire. It was perfect. We were very specific about it being shot on location on a farm so that the exterior and interior are the same. It made it difficult to shoot – it's low ceilings, so I was bumping my head because I'm quite tall.

"But it creates a real space for the cast. All those beams create a claustrophobia. It's like Ken Loach, he always shoots in real places and puts the camera in the corner. With both the farm and the landscape, I was leaning into that tradition. Then the Cerne Abbas Giant, that giant man on the hillside, we saw as primal England and put that in the movie. It's telling you that that's what you're getting into.

"There hasn't been a mainstream Hollywood movie with a wide release that's a thriller set in the UK countryside. It's criminally rare. That kind of collision of Blumhouse and Britain is quite interesting. It opened their eyes, like, 'Oh it doesn't have to be set in America.'"

Director James Watkins with James McAvoy on set.



EREN REVOLU

THE WALKING DEAD SPIN-OFF SHOWRUNNER DAVID ZABEL ON BEING GIVEN THE TOUGH TASK OF REUNITING DARYL AND CAROL IN FRANCE

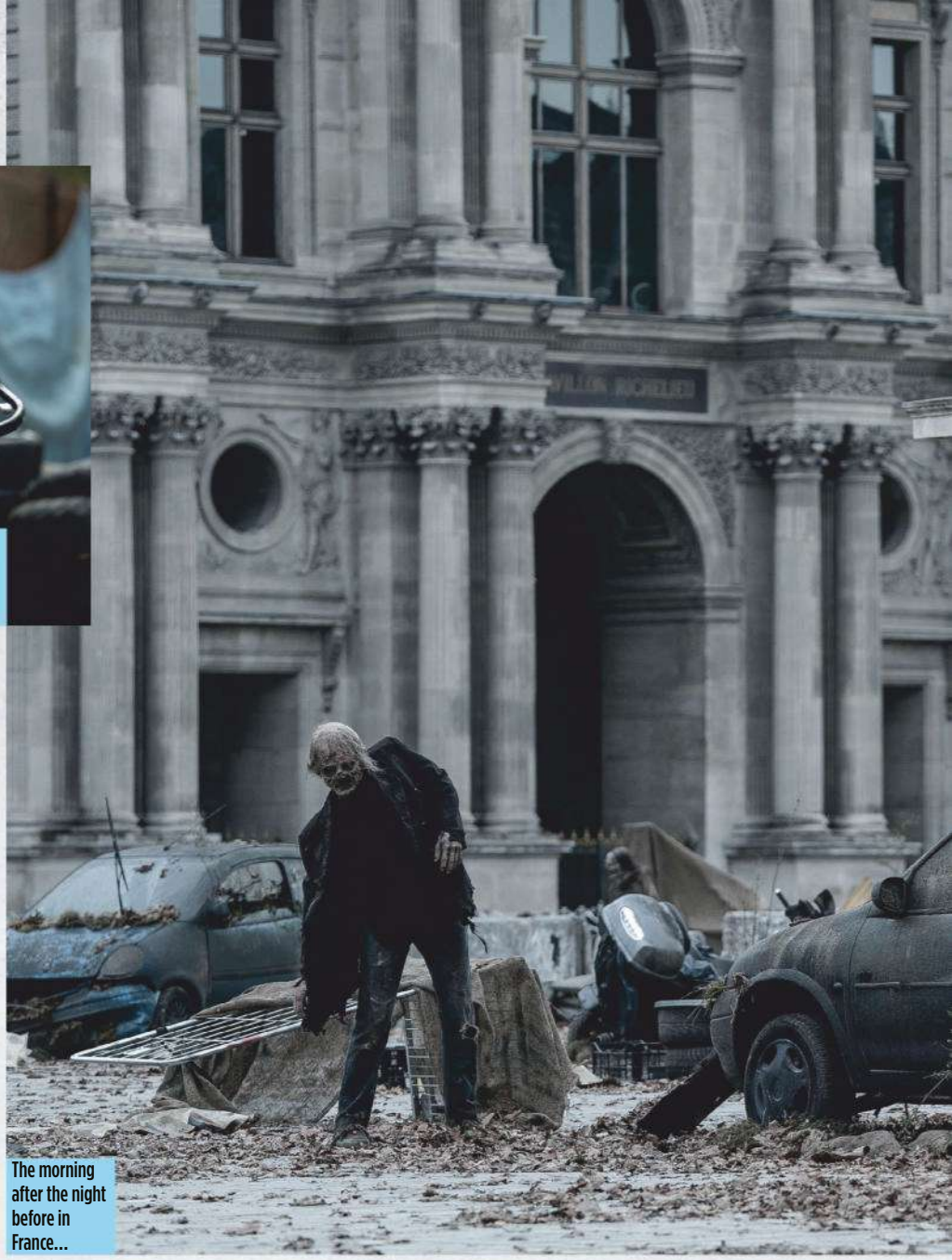
WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IN THE 14 YEARS OF AMC'S *THE WALKING DEAD* universe, the 2022 announcement that the much-anticipated spin-off series *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon*, starring Norman Reedus, would be set *and* filmed in France ranks as one of the most unexpected twists of the whole franchise.

From his introduction in the third episode of the flagship series, Daryl Dixon has always represented the personification of the insular, rural American. From his poor, abused upbringing to his indefatigable loyalty for the very few people he trusts, Dixon is the antithesis of worldliness. However, Reedus and his character's global popularity remains undisputed to this day. So the rough biker with a good heart found himself the ultimate fish out of water, literally washed up on the shore near Marseilles in season one.

Over six episodes, Dixon travelled across the gorgeously destroyed ruins of France trying to figure out exactly what had happened to him. With no memory of that, no friends and no French-speaking skills, Dixon was forced to connect with feisty nun Isabelle Carriere (Clémence Poésy); her nephew – and possible Messiah – Laurent (Louis Puech Scigliuzzi); and eventually, Losang, (Joel de la Fuente) the pacifist Union of Hope leader. →

Melissa McBride returns as Carol Peletier.



The morning after the night before in France...

The man responsible for this radical arc is showrunner/executive producer David Zabel (*ER*), a newbie to the *Walking Dead* universe. He tells *SFX* that even as a casual fan, Dixon was always a favourite of his. So when he got the job to run the spin-off, he was thrilled to be able to drop Dixon (and Reedus) into a fresh environment that would force the character to confront his past and present without the crutch of his Commonwealth family, including bestie Carol Peletier (Melissa McBride).

"He's in a place where he doesn't fully understand the language, or the culture. He's surrounded most immediately by people of deep faith, yet he does not share that faith," Zabel says of Dixon's ongoing predicament in France. "There was something quite lovely to me about that, because he has great affection for Isabelle and Laurent but he doesn't believe what they believe.

"Yet they're still very tightly bound to each other. He's trying to be a different kind of parent for Laurent than Isabelle is as a mother figure. It felt simultaneously of a piece with the original series, but also like an expansion of it."

FRIENDS REUNITED

By the end of the first season, Dixon made the decision to stay with the pair to better prepare them to withstand their immediate threats, like the overzealous religious believers and antagonists like the Pouvoir des Vivants (Power of the Living), a paramilitary group that is experimenting with Walkers so they become beefed-up versions called "Ampers".

"[Daryl] has a need to make sure this child will be okay in a world, specifically in a France, that seems to be very dangerous for him," Zabel says of Dixon's decision. "He's trying to navigate that. How to preserve some of what's beautiful about that child who has been given to him, largely by Isabelle, but also make that child strong enough, tough enough to defend himself in the world."

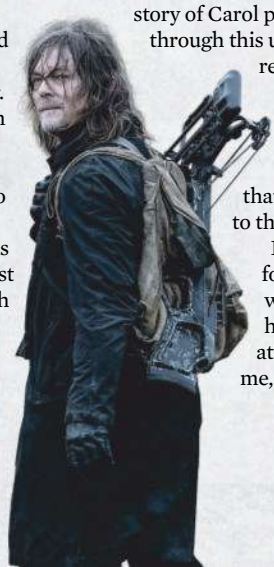
However, what Daryl doesn't know is that his brief radio call across the ocean with Carol in "Deux Amours" compelled his friend to work out a way to make the perilous journey to find him. Carol's pursuit of leads ended the season, and gave Zabel and his writers a roadmap for season two, with the pair of characters pulling off parallel protagonist duty.

"A phrase that comes up a lot is the 'cosmic connection' between the two of them," Zabel says of the singular connection between Daryl/Carol. "I always found the relationship between them beautiful. As a fan prior to my experience here, those two were the characters that I always was most intrigued by and interested in individually, and in terms of their relationship with each other. So her desire and need to go search for him and find him to make sure he's okay, that made sense pretty quickly."

While McBride had initially signed up to do the spin-off with Reedus, the European relocation kept her out of the first season as a regular. When she was able to join the cast for season two, Zabel says he sat down with the actress to find out what she still wanted to explore with Carol.

"Immediately, we started talking about the trauma that Carol had been through, that she felt she hadn't totally processed," he recalls. "She hadn't had the time and ability to process the things that Carol had endured on *The Walking Dead*, so that was still an unanswered question for her as a character and as an actor playing that character. That's what we really endeavoured to dig into for season two – this story of Carol processing and working through this unresolved grief that really begins with the biggest of all, which is her daughter, the loss of Sophia, but continues with a lot of other things that have been subsequent to that."

He continues, "Searching for Daryl, in a way, is also a way to cure herself; to find her friend and heal herself at the same time. That, to me, made it complicated and



STOCK IMAGES: SEOHWA-KIM, KENTARCAJUAN/GETTY

THE "AMPERS" GO BIG

David Zabel teases how executive producer Greg Nicotero is reimagining the Walker threat

"Starting in season one and it gets enhanced in season two, was this idea of these 'amped up' Walkers that are injected with some kind of chemicals that alter them," Zabel says of France's unique undead threat. "That was always a very exciting thing for me from the horror standpoint, and a great thing to sit down with Greg to figure out how to make that work, how to make it look and how to make it feel different. We're always trying to come up with something different, but it has to be within the rules of the show and the universe.

"Greg has really done amazing [work]. It's strange to say it sometimes, but he does some beautiful things on screen with the horror," he says. "That has been really exciting. Those scenes play out pretty strong by the end of season one, and then it plays even more, to some extent, in season two as Genet's army of amped-up Walkers grows."

cool and also totally justified, because she has to go to desperate and extraordinary measures to try to find him. She's saving herself and she's saving him at the same time, and that made it much more exciting to write and much more exciting for the actor to play, because there's so many levels to it."

Zabel notes that this spin-off also finally gives these two actors the spotlight. Before, they'd always had to share it with the large ensemble of characters on *The Walking Dead*. "Here they get to really carry a story, and you get to go into nooks and crannies of their personalities and their experiences in a way that are harder to do in a bigger-cast show," he says.

Without spoiling big things to come, Zabel indicates that audiences can expect Carol's best and worst sides to come out during her quest to make it to France. He teases that she'll meet and make a key alliance with Ash (Manish Dayal), an ingenious survivor who not only shares some similar trauma, but has access to a working plane.

Meanwhile in France, the tentative bond between Dixon and Isabelle will continue to evolve organically. "There are moments of friction, but there are obviously moments of mutual interest, and more than friendship that seems to be developing," Zabel confirms.

"Norman and I talked about this, that we wanted to draw a mature, adult relationship between a man and a woman and see where it went. Let's just put these two characters, who are very different in very interesting, intriguing ways, force them together by the story facts, and then see what happens.

"What happened in season one was that you could see a connection forming, for sure," he continues. "We didn't manufacture that but we left room for it. A lot of season two is about the development of that and where that relationship goes, and that little surrogate family of Isabelle, Daryl and Laurent."

Isabelle Carriere (Clémence Poésy).

Does that mean long-time shippers of Daryl and Carol are in for some heartbreak? Zabel says yes, because he and the actors are of the same mind when it comes to the duo's bond. "I know there are a lot of fans who feel this way, and I respect that," he says.

"The obvious thing to do, and the easier thing to do would be, 'Okay, now they're falling in love and they're a couple.' But I always felt like that would be a mistake, because it would feel like you were going into the TV book of tricks. To me, there was never a question that [their connection] was something other than what it is, and what it seems to want to be, and why it works so well."

Zabel counters that the more interesting story to ponder is what might happen when a journey-changed Carol meets an experience-changed Daryl in France. "On the other side of that was the idea that, when she does get to him, what does she find?" Zabel says. "Will she find somebody who has changed in some ways, and who has found something that she did not expect him to find? *That* is a great way to advance this relationship. When they finally do get together, eventually, what she finds is not exactly the guy who left her. And she's not the Carol that he left behind when they said goodbye on the bench."

> **"We wanted to draw a mature, adult relationship between a man and a woman"**

The good news is that there won't be a rush to figure out exactly who those new people are because AMC has already renewed *Daryl Dixon* for a third season, which is set to begin production in late summer in Spain.

Creatively, Zabel says he's been really satisfied that so far, they've been able to both honour the past while progressing Daryl and Carol. "My focus in navigating these two was don't get stuck in a rut, but also, don't let them stop changing and growing. If you can manage between those two, then you're telling good stories. You're letting the characters move forward and letting the actors play different and new things.

"You can see it in Norman and Melissa's performances. They're bringing an energy to it and a spirit to it that does feel somewhat reinvigorated."

The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon – The Book Of Carol is on AMC from 29 September and on Sky Max/NOW in the UK soon. Season one is on Blu-ray and DVD from 30 September.

TO CAP IT ALL OFF

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF THE BBC SERIES THE TRIPODS

WORDS: **JOHN ISLES AND REBECCA J WRAY**

NOT QUITE CAPPING Day, but a celebration worthy of note, this month marks the 40th anniversary of the debut of *The Tripods* on BBC One.

The series was based on a set of novels by "John Christopher" – actually a pen name of Sam Youd. A jack of all trades, his work covered various genres including sci-fi, thrillers, comedy, historical gothic romance, cricket novels, hospital erotica and serious literature, all written under different names.

Comprising *The White Mountains*, *The City Of Gold And Lead* (both 1967) and *The Pool Of Fire* (1968), the Tripods trilogy marked Youd's entry into children's literature. Set in a post-apocalyptic scenario, they depict an Earth ruled for 100 years by huge, three-legged metal walking machines. No one knows if they're AI, piloted by extraterrestrial beings, or something else entirely...

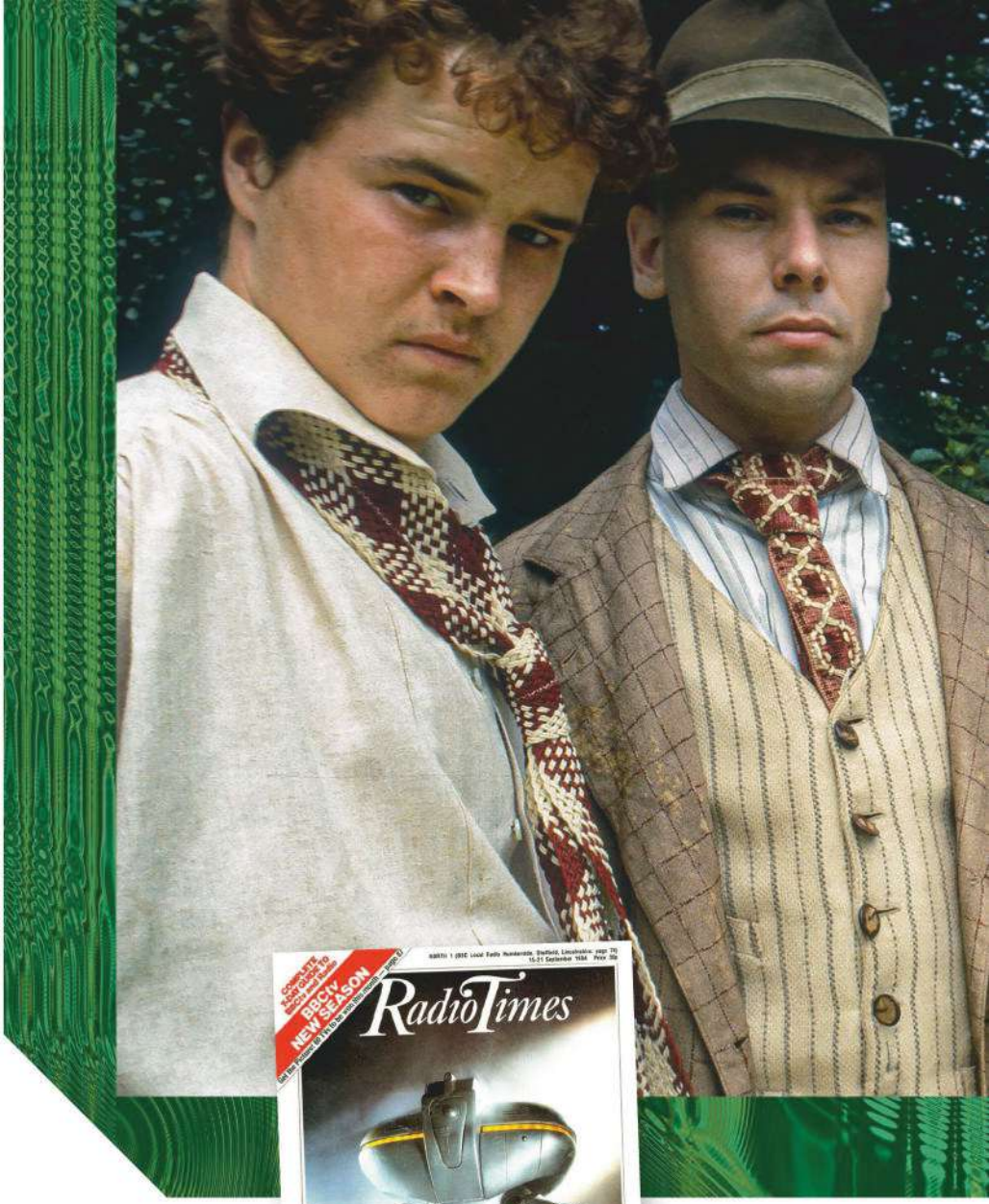
WILL, FREE

Here, humankind is living in pre-industrial villages, and everything is seemingly tranquil, peaceful and idyllic. But they've been enslaved through the use of Capping. At the age of 14, teenagers are plucked from their villages and bestowed with a "Cap" which renders them docile, suppressing all sense of free will and individuality.

Will Parker, one year away from his own Capping, begins to have doubts after witnessing a complete personality change in his best friend Jack, who's just been Capped. He then meets a mysterious man with a fake Cap named Ozymandias, who encourages Will to leave his home and join a resistance group based in the Swiss Alps to free humanity from the Tripods' control.

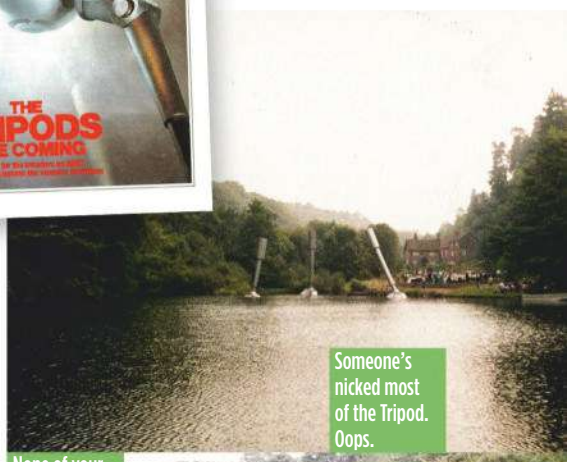
The first book covers the journey of Will (played by John Shackley in the TV series), his cousin Henry (Jim Baker) and a French boy they meet on the way called Jean-Paul (Ceri Seel), who they nickname Beanpole, to find this group. In the second novel and the TV series, they're joined by a teenage German boy, Fritz (Robin Hayter). The remainder of the trilogy focuses on the boys infiltrating the Tripods' domed city (the focus of series two) and an eventual fightback.

The first series of the BBC's television adaptation, consisting of 13 25-minute episodes, began airing on 15 September 1984. A second series of 12 episodes was broadcast the following year. Producer Richard Bates



Filming at Windsor Hill Tunnels in 1983.

Look at the legs on that... The 30ft props.


Someone's nicked most of the Tripod. Oops.

None of your CG nonsense here, just hard work.

PICTURES: BBC, RADIO TIMES, CHRIS JONES, RICHARD BATES

Jim Baker (Henry), John Shackley (Will) and the soon-to-be-capped Jack.

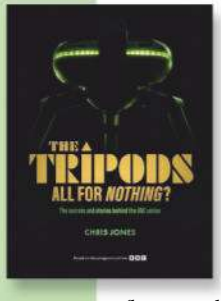
Filming the scene where Jack is taken for "capping".

GOING BY THE BOOK

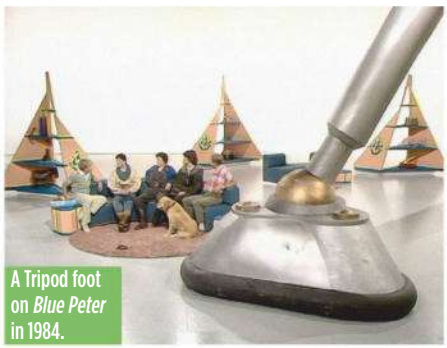
Back in 2004, New Zealand fan Chris Jones joined with *Tripods* fan club founder Adrian J Andrews and Jim Baker (who played Henry Parker) to write the definitive Making Of book based on the show.

"Each time I'd stand in book shops scanning through cult film and television titles – *Twilight* this, *Twilight* that, *Doctor Who*, *Alien*, *Doctor Who*, *The X-Files*, *Firefly*, and oh... surprise! *Doctor Who*. Again," Jones says. "My aggravation levels would jump up a notch. Why not *The Tripods*?"

Twenty years later, the Jones-penned *The Tripods: All For Nothing? The Secrets And Stories Behind The BBC Series* provides fans with an in-depth look into the production, featuring a wealth of previously unseen material from the BBC archives and interviews with more than 100 cast and crew. Jones says that taking time over the project has definitely paid dividends.



"It really is like opening the vault," he tells *SFX*. "There are literally thousands of images and workings which have never seen the light of day – until now. It's been a complete privilege to uncover it all."



A Tripod foot on *Blue Peter* in 1984.

> **"More than once the project was commissioned but then dropped"**

initially tried to bring the three-legged giants to the small screen 15 years earlier, however.

"I first read John Christopher's three books in the late '60s and was immediately determined to find a way one day to bring them to a television audience," he tells *SFX*. "More than once the project was commissioned but then dropped, and it wasn't until the cancellation of further *Doctor Who* episodes that I realised the BBC had a gap in their schedules at the perfect time of day for a new children's series."

Before you write in, *Who* fans: no, this isn't *quite* correct... It was actually the rescheduling of *Doctor Who* to Monday and Tuesday nights in 1982 which meant *The Tripods* was free to take up its regular Saturday teatime slot.

Part of the series' appeal was Bates's use of what was, in the '80s, cutting-edge technology to bring the titular Tripods, and their vast city, to life. "Ideally the programmes should have been made on film, but no facilities were available in 1983 so we had to make do with analogue video equipment in the studio, on location and in the effects studio," he says. "Of course, modern digital equipment would have changed everything, but that was all still in the future."

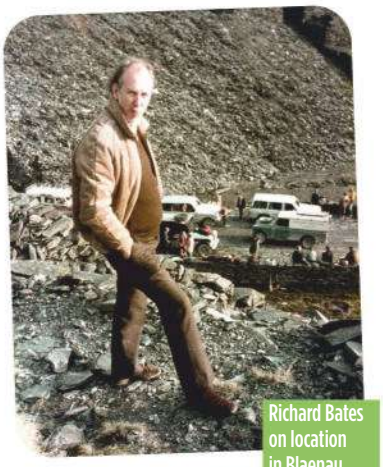
In their 2015 book *The Classic British Telefantasy Guide*, Paul Cornell, Martin Day and Keith Topping describe *The Tripods* as having "cheap special effects". But in fact the series had a larger budget than *Doctor Who*. Shot entirely on video, the series used Quantel, a video graphics machine (borrowed overnight from the BBC Weather Department) to push the limits of video effects.

The use of video for both location and model work resulted in a more natural blending of the two – something regularly augmented by the use of three 30-foot tall Tripod legs on location.

Ken Freeman's striking, bombastic theme tune was accompanied by an eye-catching title sequence. Producing the animation for this involved rendering five frames each evening over the course of five months (amounting to 25 frames per second for a 45-second sequence).

Back in 2022, the podcast *Tripodscast* asked actor Jim Baker (Henry Parker) for his memories of the series. "It's a great story, and people really get hooked by it," Baker said. "Always escaping the establishment, and trying to fight, and get back their world as they saw it. Taking it back for humanity."

As for how it feels to still be talking about a series that he worked on when he was 18 years →



Richard Bates on location in Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Will Parker (John Shackley) on his quest.

old, he remarked, "It's amazing isn't it? It's quite incredible. It just proves the writing is there, the story's there." Similarly, Ceri Seel (Beanpole) told *Tripodscast* in 2021: "It was an incredibly exciting thing to have got involved with."

John Shackley (Will Parker), who these days lives and works in Chile in a management role for Marriott Hotels, had this message for the fans when he appeared on *Tripodscast* in 2022: "I really do sincerely appreciate that you are devoted. That you're not a member of a cult. That you are devoted fans to a TV show that, I'll be perfectly honest, did change my life."

The three leads were joined by Robin Hayter as Fritz Eger for the second series. Speaking on *Tripodscast* in 2022, the actor recalled his audition. "[I'd] actually read *The White Mountains* when I was a kid – when I was 10 or something. And I remembered, as I was auditioning: I thought, 'I know this story.' And I suddenly found that I was becoming possibly involved in a story that I'd read as a kid. I was actually very excited by that.

"I'd played a few Germans before," Hayter continued, "although this guy was Swiss-German – Fritz was supposed to be Swiss-German. I'd been in a film called *Friend or Foe* by The Children's Film Foundation – I played a German pilot who crashed in Britain during the War. I've done another couple of German parts as well."

Hayter also recalls seeing a copy of the BBC tie-in reprint of *The White Mountains* in the room. "John, Ceri and Jim – they were all on the front of this book. 'Wow. You know, if I get this job, I could be as big as these guys. I'm gonna be on a book cover.'" In fact, and sadly for Hayter, the character of Fritz wasn't featured on either of the other two BBC tie-in covers.

The series received plenty of promotion in the lead up to transmission, including TV ads and a *Radio Times* cover with a striking photo of a Tripod. There was even a feature about it on *Blue Peter* a week after the first episode was transmitted.

Viewing figures for the first series averaged 6.2 million, with a peak of 8 million for the final episode. BBC high-ups at the time considered these figures too low, so the show was cancelled before a third series could be put into production.

This was unexpected news for Bates. "Cancellation of series three in such a casual way was a bitter blow, and demonstrated how far the senior management were from the programme makers," he says. "No discussion, just 'Goodbye'!"

Actor Robin Hayter was also deeply disapppointed, as he told *Tripodscast*. "I saw

Fancy making your own Tripod? Get an Allen key.

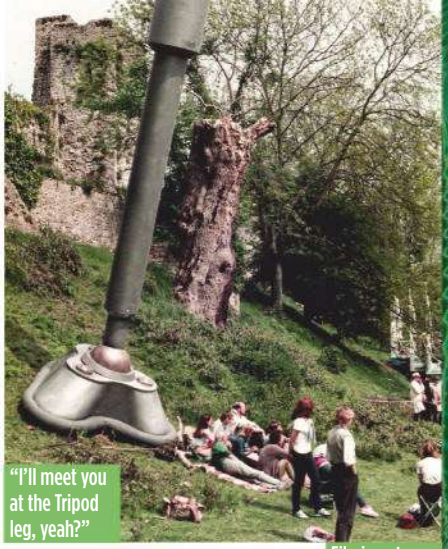
FREEMEN CALLING

Four decades after the show was first broadcast, it's still drawing new fans and generating interest. In October 2021, a podcast dedicated to covering everything to do with the books, TV show and spin-off media was launched.

***Tripodscast* was co-hosted by the authors of this article, alongside Dani Wray (a first-time reader/viewer), and produced by Kevin Hiley. Running for 14 episodes, it included interviews with producer Richard Bates, all of the main cast, and vox pops from fans of the show.**

The podcast also spoke to Rose and Nick Youd, two of Sam Youd's children, who run The Syle Press, which preserves the author's legacy and publishes his various works (excluding the Tripods trilogy, and prequel *When The Tripods Came*, the rights to which are held by Penguin), and reviewed a sample of his books, across different genres.

STOCK ELEMENTS: COBRACZ, GUNTUR SEPTYAN/ GETTY



"I'll meet you at the Tripod leg, yeah?"

Filming at White City Stadium.

"I can see the problem, mate."

Will, Fritz and friends just casually hanging out.

well as new fans globally, continue to remember the series on The League of Freemen's Facebook group. There's also a German fan group called Die Dreibeinigen Herrscher ("The Three-Legged Rulers") which still holds meetings, plus there was a short-lived Finnish group named Tripod Army Finland.

VILLAGE PEOPLE

The series' 40th anniversary will be celebrated on 14 September at Tripods40, an event being held, appropriately enough, in – to quote the opening caption of the very first episode– a village in England: Hanslope, near Milton Keynes.

As well as hosting the launch of a new book (see box, left), the event will reunite the lead stars of the TV series: John Shackley, Ceri Seel, Jim Baker and Robin Hayter, as well as producer Richard Bates.

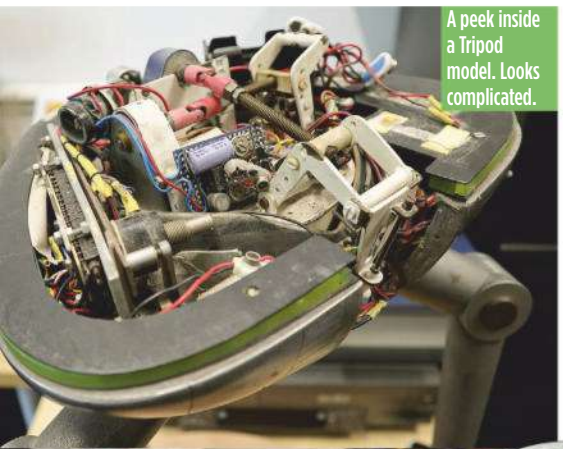
Involving a mixture of panel discussions, autograph sessions and prop displays, it will raise money for Centrepoint UK, which campaigns to end youth homelessness.

Those who worked on the series still remember it fondly. *SFX* asks Richard Bates how he feels about all this renewed attention. "It is quite a shock to realise that the *Tripods* television series is now 40 years old – and even more extraordinary to learn that after all these years people are still interested, and that the fan club will be getting together in September for a reunion.

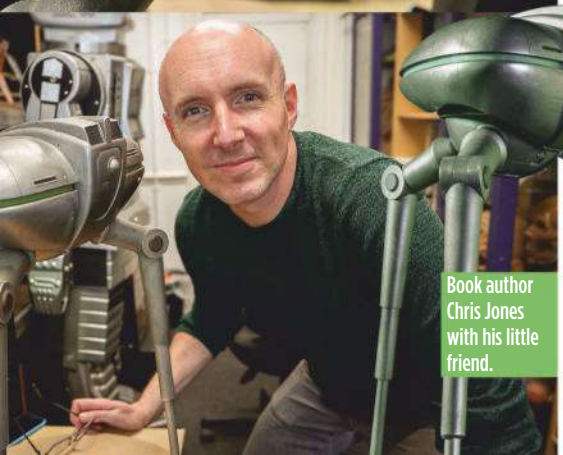
"I remain very proud of the production and immensely grateful for all the hard work put in by all departments to achieve programmes which are still impressive and entertaining today."

Tripods40 should be a fitting tribute to a series that may be widely regarded in sci-fi fandom as an underdog, but which tells a strong story of teenagers overcoming oppression, and the loss of free will – all accompanied, of course, by really cool alien machines.

The Tripods is available on DVD. The Tripods: All Or Nothing can be ordered from tripods.graphetti.co.nz. You can listen to the Tripodscast podcast via bit.ly/tripodscast.



A peek inside a Tripod model. Looks complicated.



Book author Chris Jones with his little friend.

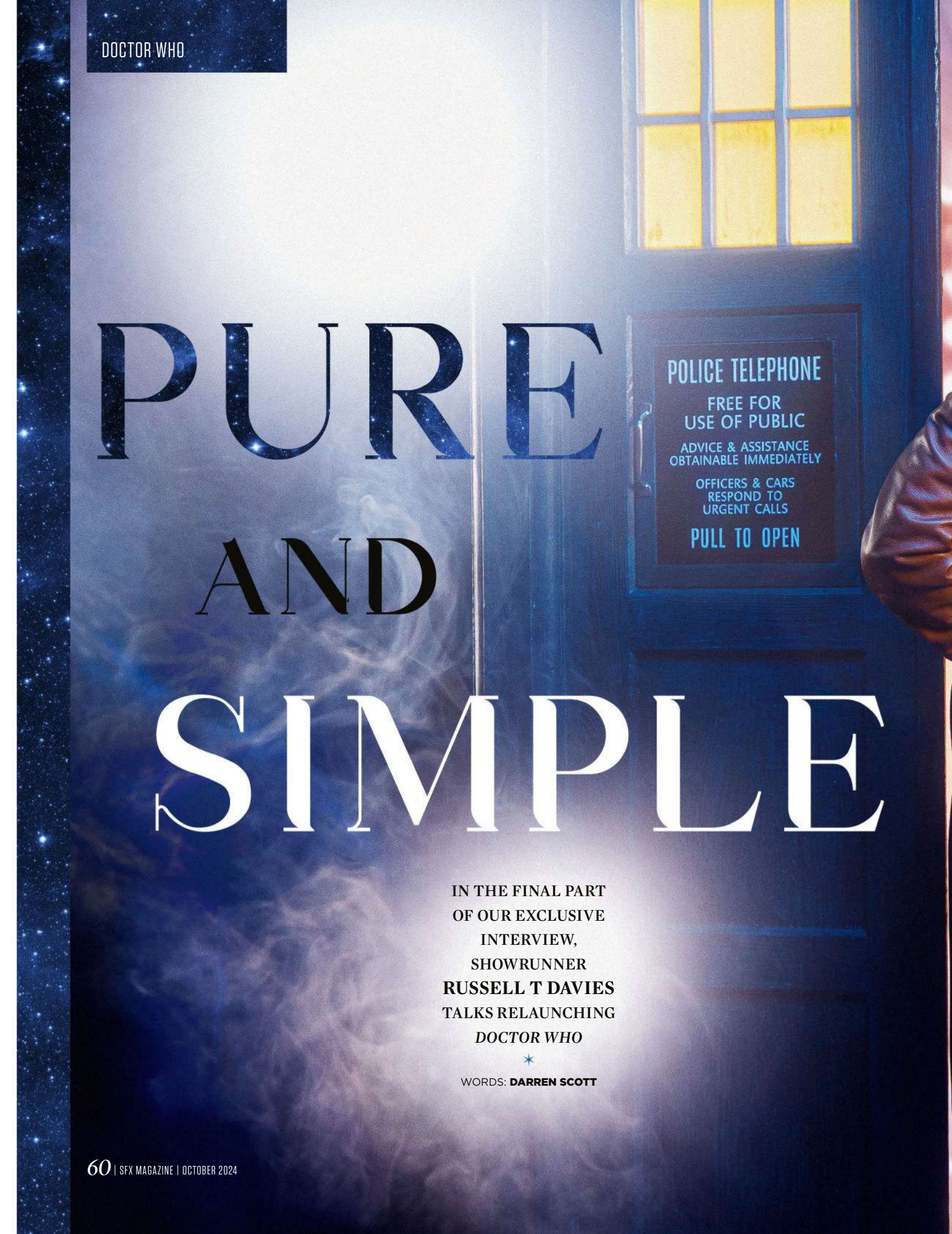
"I remain very proud of the production and immensely grateful for the hard work put in"

some of the scripts. I saw the outlines [for the third series]. I was totally bazooka-ed! Apart from anything, I know [the third book] is set in Panama, but I think we were gonna go and film it in Almeria or something in Spain. And then for the fans as well... bit of a drag really."

Ardent fans were equally dismayed at *The Tripods* being cut short before the events of the final book were covered. Disappointed viewers were encouraged to seek out the novels to find out how the story ends.

The League of Freemen, an official BBC *Tripods* Fan Society set up by Adrian J Andrews, ran from 1985-1987. In 2004 it restarted online as a Yahoo Group forum, with social gatherings and location visits being organised by members. Cast and crew would regularly join fans for these events. Original club members, as

PURE AND SIMPLE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IN THE FINAL PART OF OUR EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, SHOWRUNNER RUSSELL T DAVIES TALKS RELAUNCHING *DOCTOR WHO*

✶

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Millie Gibson larks about between takes.

Director Ben Chessell on "The Devil's Chord".

Director Dylan Holmes Williams with Callie Cooke.

"Dot And Bubble" was originally suggested in 2010. Was the throughline the same?

◆ No. It wasn't a treatment, it was a chat. It was just literally an idea of what if Twitter followed you around all day as a bubble, as pictures. It was that simple. If I had written that in 2010 for Steven [Moffat], then I would have led it somewhere else. I would've led it to whatever subject was in my head at that time. I think that rose naturally out of the casting of Ncuti. And thanks to him for allowing that story and portraying it *so* magnificently in that final scene, which is the performance of a lifetime, I think. I think it's the Doctor of a lifetime there, I think that's really, truly astonishing.

Sadly, I will admit that should have been a problem with every Doctor, and shouldn't have to be the Doctor's role to inherit stories of that weight. Nonetheless, it came very naturally from a lot of conversations. Everyone said to me, "What's it going to be like when the Doctor goes back into history now – like, he'd face racism in Victorian times, he'd face racism in Regency times, he'd face racism in the 1300s" and then actually I sat there thinking, "He'd face racism now, what on earth are you on about?"

Do you write the visibly emotional performances from Ncuti, or does he bring the tears himself?

◆ Sometimes I write it in. Actually, I wrote it less and less because Ncuti would rather I didn't. He would much rather he feels his way through it. I don't want to put words in his mouth. But it's very largely his choice, and I love it. I adore it. We look forward to those moments. It's amazing, and it's what he does now. That's who the Doctor is.

When an actor feels that happy and relaxed and open and confident and true, then there's no way I'd even drop a slightest line, not a note. In fact, the only line we give is, "Just keep doing that. Keep doing what you feel happy with, this is magnificent." A Doctor who's more emotional, who expresses his emotions more, and that's particularly appealing to a young audience.

The one thing you do with children now, with young people of any age, is to say that you want to express your emotions. One thing we must encourage young people to do is to talk about when they're sad – and equally, when they're happy, to post a dance on TikTok to show that as well. Children's mental health is our greatest problem in society, in the West. So I love that – suddenly it's almost my desire and his talent, remarkably combined to produce this. We didn't talk about this, this is a complete coincidence that what I write chimed with how he acts. And I love it. I *absolutely* love it. If you don't like it, good luck to you. Because there's gonna be a lot more of it!

You mentioned TikTok dancing. Besides "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini", were any other songs considered for "Dot And Bubble?"

◆ Oh, no. I think it was that one straight away. I've always loved that one. I love insane pop. That's insane. That was straight away the number one choice. What would I have done otherwise? The one you can never get, the one you can never clear for television is The Fast Food Rockers, that song about McDonald's ["Fast Food Song"]. I'd love to put that on, because that's the insanest piece of pop ever. Try listening to that on a loop, you'd go mad and throw yourself out of a window. But of course, because it mentions McDonald's you can't get it on television. I've tried many times to put that on screen and you just can't.

Have you heard from Timmy Mallet?

◆ Not a word. Timmy, where are you? Surely he sold some records, surely!

How has the season one experience been for you overall?

◆ I feel absolutely delighted. None of us have worked at this level of budget before, none of us have worked with Disney before – we've all learned a lot and we're all delighted with the way it's worked out. I've genuinely got to say we're very, very lucky. To see them fall in love with *Doctor Who* over the process of making these episodes has been lovely – and I mean it, they've done that. They liked it to begin with. They literally love it now, at the end of the process. It's been lovely working with them as a production team. Really, real joy in it.

Ncuti Gatwa and his screwdriver. It's sonic!

Don't worry, they're acting... we hope, anyway.

> **"I'm pleased at the range of it. It's always going to be a show that's different every week"**

There's been a lot of talk about ratings as well...

◆ We have a show that is getting over six million viewers and still growing. That's great. I can't believe that 21 million viewers aren't watching. That's my problem.

I genuinely mean that. In Britain I want – what's the population of this country? Sixty million. I want 60 million people watching, so I will never rest until that happens.

Nonetheless, I love it. I think it's an enormously good series. I think we've made episodes that echo, things like "73 Yards" you possibly think about for the rest of your life. We've done an episode based on a pun on the word bogeys, which I think is hilarious. Five-year-olds watching that are just hooting with laughter.

I'm very pleased at the range of it. It's always going to be a show that's different every week. So it was my intention to make it really, really different every week, and I think we've done that. We've certainly done that next year as well. So we're delighted, to be honest, with what we've done.

The most delightful Doctor and the most loveable companion, that's been the joy of it. My god. That's why I want 60 million people watching, I want them to see them. That final scene of them together on the TARDIS is so beautiful. The acting of the two of them is superb. I couldn't be happier.

Has there been any news on a renewal for season three?

◆ It's an industry decision, it's like any business – these things take time. I think the decision will come after the transmission of season two. That's what we're expecting, that's what we've always been heading towards.

Choreographer Jack Murphy with Millie in "Rogue".

Ncuti gets rearranged on the set of "Rogue".

You look at a 60-year-old show and think, how can it possibly be the same, but be different? But it was very different, yet it still was the same!

◆ Good! That's what I set out to do, and I don't quite know how we did it. I came back to it with two very simple intentions: obviously, to make it good, but I wanted it simpler, and I wanted it younger, as simple as that.

That's partly down to having a young Doctor, having Millie – who was 18 years old when we cast her – and that's a very significant thing to get on screen. I hope that's helped reach a younger audience. They're saying in their BBC figures that our [age] 16-30 audiences are amazing [top drama on BBC for under 35s].

There's some astonishingly simple stories. "The Devil's Chord" is the Doctor beats evil god, fights them and wins. "Rogue", it's the Doctor meets somebody he loves and loses them, and defeats some birds along the way. Even things like "73 Yards", which is possibly as mystical and deep and strange as you could possibly get, it's very simple.

There's not actually many plot twists in it, in fact it's the same story told over and over again. What "73 Yards" does is go through different genres. It takes that woman and puts her in a Welsh folk horror pub, then she goes into a UNIT story, then she goes into a political story, then she goes into one of those stories that turns out to have lasted for 80 years.

You could talk about "73 Yards" forever, but it's actually very, very simple. So I wanted that brought back, simplicity. →

There's always a twist at the end... at Abbey Road.

Ruby Sunday discovers a terrible truth in "73 Yards".

There's been a *lot* of talk about "73 Yards"...

◆ It's very interesting, people keep on saying, "What does the woman say to her?" and you're literally asking the wrong question, because there's nothing a woman could say to you in 10 seconds that would make you run away from your own daughter. That sentence doesn't exist. So therefore what is happening with the woman is far deeper and graver and malevolent and dangerous than a simple sentence.

I say I don't explain things, but you are then suddenly given that clue in episode eight that it's connected to the TARDIS perception filter, and suddenly that starts to make sense. But I'm not gonna go into any more detail.

What everyone leaves out of the equation is that actually we're now in a universe in which fairy circles are real and have power. I will tell you that Mad Jack [mentioned on a note left in the circle] was just a dog. There is no Mad Jack. I love people making up theories about Mad Jack.

Is there anything you'd do differently?

◆ It's hard for me to tell, possibly, because I'm so steeped in *Doctor Who*. In an ideal world, what we wouldn't have done is had a Doctor-lite episode and then a comparatively Doctor-lite episode. But that's because of *Sex Education*. It's worthwhile spelling this out, because I have seen people saying, "Why did you even shoot the series knowing that Ncuti wasn't available?" That's all hindsight.

Six or nine months before we've started shooting, we're having to base scripts on *Sex Education*, not knowing what their dates are, who are completely free to change their dates. This is not their fault in any shape or form – any production is allowed to do what they want. They've got nothing to do with *Doctor Who*. So when Ncuti might have originally been available in October, then it was November, then it was December, then it was January, at which point we had to take action. We had to take action not knowing what the future was.

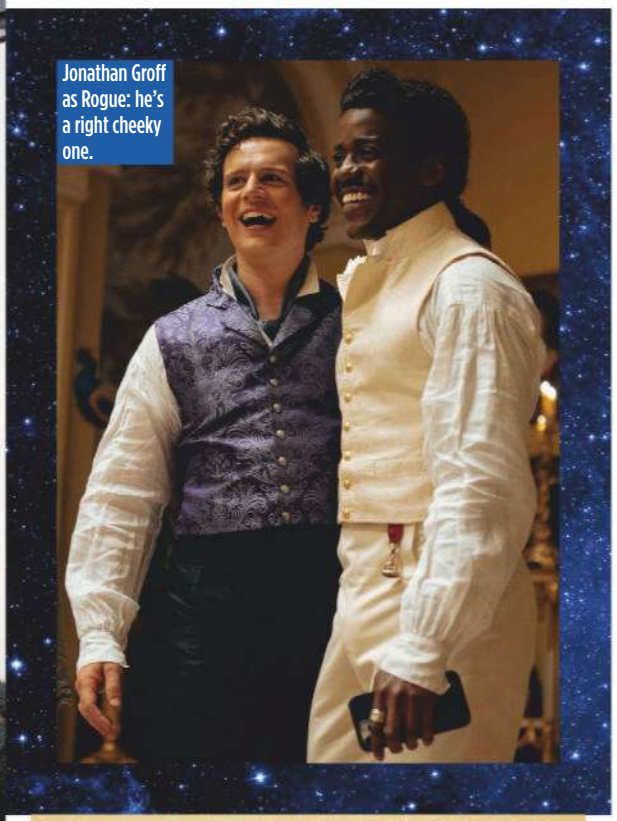
So every analysis you're seeing of what we did there is done with hindsight, knowing exactly when Ncuti was free. We did not know, and had to do this to barricade the future, to make sure we got a show on air. The other choice, and there was a very clear choice, was not to go on air until 2025, and I *absolutely* thought that was wrong. I thought, "There's no way we're going off air for that long." Maybe that's the wrong decision. Maybe that could have worked to our advantage in a better way. I don't think so. I don't entertain that for a second actually, and I did think these things through.

> **"I'd like 52 episodes of Doctor Who a year, that would make me happy. Never gonna happen"**

As ever, what you should bear in mind with internet opinions is that people are perfectly free to have opinions, but they've given it five minutes' thought. We live with it 24 hours a day. You can *absolutely* guarantee we have given it more thought, and we have more reasons for doing what we've done than you can possibly imagine.

To put those two episodes against each other, to have the Doctor-lite one then the comparatively Doctor-lite one next week, I think that's wise. Otherwise the programme jerks up and down, the programme becomes inconstant. Instead we had a middle patch of the show, in which we told interesting stories that have worked – "73 Yards" has undoubtedly

DOCTOR WHO PICTURES © BBC STUDIOS. YOSHITAKA KONO, JAMES PARDON, SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN, ALISTAIR HEAP



Jonathan Groff as Rogue: he's a right cheeky one.

So that's goodbye for now... is it 2025 yet?

worked, and the chatter on "Dot And Bubble" has been huge. So yeah, I stick by my plan, not a single regret. Can that be the coverline, please?

Would you have liked more episodes?

◆ I don't think more episodes was ever an option, even from the start, right before we even had Disney onboard as a streamer. Even when we were streamer-less, given the budget that we were looking for, and the nature of streamers these days, people are glad to have eight episodes. I think any more episodes would've killed us.

It's a phenomenal undertaking making television on this scale. Just compare our credits to the credits of other shows of this budget. We have about a third of the staff. You might watch our credits thinking, "What a lot of staff!" It's actually the opposite, we've a third and it's such a lot of work!

I'd like 52 episodes of *Doctor Who* a year, that would make me happy. It's never gonna happen and I don't think we'll ever see that increasing in years to come, to be honest. It's nine, not eight, with the Christmas special. Given the nature of funding, the nature of production, I don't think it's ever going to increase. Dont' forget, we've got the big spin-off, *The War Between The Land And The Sea*, and trust me, that's five massive episodes. It's a lot to produce. So complain all you like, it's not going to change.

Nothing's been condensed. There's only so many times you can have Susan Twist crop up! All that would've happened is you'd have had a story set on Mars in which she would've been a passing astronaut and it might have snowed on Ruby once more.

You set the story up with certain puzzles, but simply repeat them again – coming back to the simplicity of it, these puzzles don't particularly change week by week. They get noticed more. Who is Ruby's mother? You ask that for seven weeks. Who is Susan Twist? You ask that for seven weeks. I don't think either of those would get richer and I would stop them getting more complicated if they were spread over 10 or 12 weeks. So I think we're fine. I think people are grating against it who are so used to the show. This is the *Doctor Who* discourse, but these are people who study the show day in and day out. My sisters noticed this. My sisters sit there going, "Oh, it's that woman again" and "Oh, it's the finale this week, I'm so excited". It's that simple.

What can you tease about season two?

◆ I'm so excited about the next series. We have debates in the office as to whether season two is better than season one. Currently, they think season two is better. I think they're level playing, they're both as good as each other. There's *so* many surprises coming up next year. Oh my god, I can't wait. You'll have such a good time. Good times ahead. Robots, monsters, enemies like you've never seen before. ●

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

RIDE TO

DESTINY

CYBERMEN! DARK ARTS! SPACESHIPS! SOCIAL WORKERS! *DOCTOR WHO*'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL "SILVER NEMESIS" IS HEADED TO BLU-RAY. "IT WILL ALWAYS BE THE WILDCARD ON MY CV," WRITER KEVIN CLARKE TELLS US

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

KEVIN CLARKE UNEXPECTEDLY found his calling while training to be a drama teacher at Bretton Hall college, near Wakefield. "[Playwright] Trevor Griffiths came along to do a talk," he recalls. "As soon as he started talking, I thought, 'That's what I want to be; that's what I want to do.'"

Clarke went on to beat 25,000 applicants in becoming one of seven students on the first-ever BBC scriptwriters' course.

What was the path that led you to write for *Doctor Who*?

◆ I did *Casualty* and I went straight on to another BBC show; a long-forgotten cop show. Then I got an ITV one. I had a very good agent when I started out! Then suddenly, nothing. I bumped into one of the people I'd encountered on the course: Caroline Oulton, a script editor on *Casualty*. She said, "What are you doing next?" I said, "I haven't got anything next."

She said, "Well, *Doctor Who* are looking." I said, "I've never watched it – science fiction isn't really for me." She looked at me very seriously and said, "You've got to keep knocking them down, Kevin." I thought, "Wise advice."

So I phoned [script editor] Andrew Cartmel and said, "I've got the perfect idea." He said, "Oh great, we're looking for something very special – it's the 25th anniversary." I said, "Don't worry, I've got it." I hadn't got a clue! He said, "Can you come in tomorrow morning?"

I sat there all that evening, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't put anything together. I arrived at the office, and I still hadn't a clue what I was going to do. I said, "Can I have the Daleks?" JNT [John Nathan-Turner, producer] said, "They've already gone, they're in another story. It's the silver anniversary, you'll have the Cybermen – they're silver." Somehow, the germ of the idea began, and I got away with it. →

Nemesis, a statue made of living metal validium.

Dolores Gray meets Lady Peinforte and her servant.

Anton Diffring as the nasty Hans de Flores.

Sophie Aldred poses for a painting cut from the story.

Aldred, Sylvester McCoy and Courtney Pine.

"Silver Nemesis" was such a landmark serial. You must have felt added responsibility to satisfy the fans?

◆ It was huge. It was very, very special, not least because it had such a fanatically devoted audience. I certainly hadn't worked on something like it before. It meant so much to so many people and the anniversary publicity was building up.

At that time the young Prince Edward was making forays into the theatrical world. He wanted very much to get into the theatre. I thought it would be rather a wheeze if he was in the anniversary *Doctor Who*. Hence all that stuff with the castle [Windsor].

But then someone describing himself as a "BBC insider" phoned the *Daily Express* and said he could give them a hot tip that Prince Edward was going to be in *Doctor Who*. This was then splashed across the press the next day. The Palace had to issue a denial.

JNT said to me, "Where the fuck did that come from?" I said, "Don't ask me, I don't know." He said, "Of course you know, dear," knowing perfectly well who had phoned the *Daily Express*. But he said we couldn't get him. They did try, apparently. So that's why they turned it into the Queen impersonator.

John Nathan-Turner was as much a showman as a showrunner. What do you recall about him?

◆ I've nothing but regard for John. Very high regard indeed. I did far too much drinking with him. He gave me a break, that's what I always say. I had ups and downs with him, but they were never serious, and we parted friends.

He got some mixed press. There was a lot of gossip which as far as I knew was very unfounded. He was a professional. Gary [Downie, production manager and John's partner] was a pain in the ass. Gary was a monster, an absolute monster. After John died, he became a psychotherapist! He'd have been more suited to running a concentration camp. Oh no, he was a monster! He was a talentless creature. He was only there because John loved him. [Fellow *Who* writer] Steven Wyatt has written a play about them [*Me & Him & Who*].

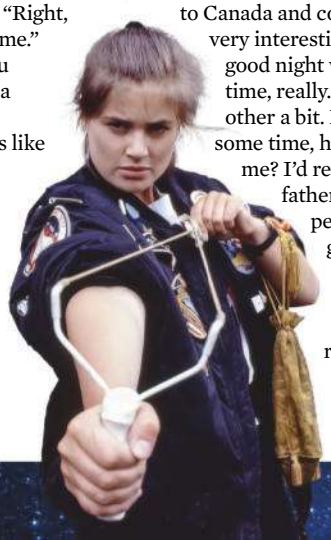
What was your impression of Anton Diffring, who led the guest cast as Nazi Hans de Flores?

◆ Anton was very suspicious, very proud. He didn't know how to handle me, and I made it my business; I went to a very unpleasant boys' school, and I don't put up with bullies. He, if you gave him half a chance, would have been a bully, and I can smell a bully at 50 paces. I'm from Birkenhead – I take no shit! So I wasn't having it from Anton.

As a 10-year-old, I saw his war films and he always made me nervous. He still had that effect on me in real life – I didn't tell him at first. Anyway, he was around for several days and was staying in the hotel. There was a very nice little scene in the evening, drinking in the bar. On the second or third evening Anton appeared. He stood there at the table waiting for somebody to look after him. I said, "Alright, Anton, come on." I went and got him a chair, sat him down. I said, "Suppose you'd like a drink?" So I got him a drink. I said, "Right, now you're going to have to talk to me." He said, "Well, alright. What do you want to say?" And actually, we had a very, very interesting chat.

I said, "Tell me about what it was like to be a young actor and being in Hitler's Germany growing up." I didn't say being gay, but I knew he was. He said, "Oh, my father never wanted me to go into the theatre." I said, "Nobody's father does. My father certainly didn't want me to go in, but he thinks I'm doing very well now I'm working with you." Suddenly all that haute – as the French say – just collapsed. He said, "No?" I said, "Yes, really, my father is tremendously impressed I'm working with you. He's seen all your films."

We talked quite a lot more about his early life in Germany; being sent on this ship across to Canada and coming to England. Very, very interesting. At the end of it we said good night with a warmth for the first time, really. We'd got to know each other a bit. I said, "Would you mind, some time, having a photo taken with me? I'd really like to send it to my father." He said, "That's fine, perhaps tomorrow." I had to go to London, but I'd be back on Friday. So I said "Friday?' He said yes. Came back and they'd rearranged the schedule



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The nemesis statue awakens in a tomb.

De Flores and his tiny band of Nazis.

Spot Gary Downie and JN-T behind Sophie Aldred.

McCoy and Dolores Gray in a publicity shot.

– he'd done all his scenes on the Thursday and gone. So, I didn't get the photo. But [the conversation] is a memory I treasure.

Star power was brought to the role of Mrs Remington by American actress and singer Dolores Gray...

It's only the Queen! Well, not really...

◆ She was in a West End show [*Follies*] at the time. John had been to see it. He was over the moon about her.

She always wanted to be called "Miss" whatever it was. I refused. [Director] Chris Clough introduced me to her as "Miss [Gray]" and I said, "Hello Delores!" She went glacial. She was monstrous. But god, she was an old pro. She refused to wear the costume she was offered. Instead, she charged the BBC a huge amount of money to wear her own fur coat and jewellery. She dripped with diamonds!

She had a suitcase with all her diamonds on it. She put it down on the pavement for the driver to open the door. He got her into the car. They drove off. Some 10 minutes before they arrived [at the filming location], she noticed she hadn't got the suitcase. All hell broke loose.

Gary went berserk! There was panic. Then somebody sensibly phoned the porter at her flat. He had seen the suitcase and come out and got it, so the diamonds were safe. A courier was then dispatched. Her schedule was rearranged, so all ended well.

At the end of the day, the poor driver who'd left her suitcase appeared. She turned to him – magnificent in her fur coat – and I thought this is now going to be the mother of all humiliations. Everybody did. There was a slight hush. He looked at her and said "I'm sorry." She looked at him, this steel face. And she walked across to him and kissed him. I thought, somewhere under there you have got a heart! I'll never forget that.

Jazz musician Courtney Pine appeared in a cameo role. How did that come about?

◆ I wrote him in chiefly because I wanted to meet him. It was legitimate because jazz featured in the script. Courtney had emerged; he was regarded as a very important cultural development. You'd never had a major black, British jazz musician before. In those days, he was doing something new, and he could play; he was the serious business. He was a very sweet guy.

> **"The producers that I worked for had either left or retired or died of drink"**

In the story's closing moments, Ace asks the Doctor, "Who are you?" He responds by putting his finger to his lips. Was a big reveal ever considered?

◆ No, we couldn't possibly. My own personal view, which JNT told me never to reveal – he said, "You can do it, but you mustn't ever say it" – was that he's God. What else could he be but a god? He's a vastly superior being. I based him closely on myself! So that was his secret. Lady Peinforte knows...

Do you have any projects in the pipeline?

◆ TV work sort of came to an end for me. I didn't want to stop writing, but the producers that I worked for had either left or retired or died of drink.

I turned to the film business for about five years. It was a horrible experience; absolutely dreadful. Finally, I could bear it no more and I decided I would write a novel. I had a film planned and I thought, I'm not going to go through this again, but I wanted to tell the story very much.

I thought, "I got away with it with the *Doctor Who* one [Kevin novelised "Silver Nemesis"], so I'll see if I can do it as a novel." Which I did. I'm waiting for it to come out. It's a thriller, set in various parts of the world.

I have to write. It's my being. ●

Doctor Who: The Collection Season 25 is released on 21 October.

Brought To Book

THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW

NEAL STEPHENSON

History man: why the cyberpunk luminary likes to look back

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Chelsea Lauren

CUNNING AND DEADLY, THE RUSSIAN female secret agent recurs in espionage fiction. And yet, though such spies are staples of myriad books, TV shows and movies, it is possible to find a new spin on their adventures. Just ask Neal Stephenson, whose Dawn Rae Bjornberg, aka Aurora, the figure at the centre of his new novel *Polostan*, began to take shape when he read about female Soviet machine gunners.

"When the revolution happened [in 1917], armies were just lots of dudes walking around carrying heavy rifles," Stephenson says. This made it tough "to integrate women into the military", as the Soviets wanted to do. The machine gun offered an opportunity.

"You could get a group of four people carrying all the different parts and putting them together," Stephenson continues. "It was viewed as being a good job for women because a machine gun is kind of like a sewing machine, right? It's very complicated and there are lots of parts moving fast, and you've got to keep them clean and lubricated."

Albeit somewhat tangentially, this became his "way in" when writing Aurora, a woman raised in both post-revolutionary Russia and the USA. Via the story of Tommy gun-wielding Bonnie and Clyde and the story of the American left through the tumultuous years between the two World Wars, Aurora began to come to life.

It's the first in a sequence concerned with the development of physics around the middle of the 20th century – a story that is of course integral to the development of the atomic bombs that would be dropped on Japan in 1945. "I wanted to lay some groundwork during the 1930s for what happened in the 1940s," he explains.

UP, UP AND AWAY

Stephenson has, since 1999's *Cryptonomicon*, shifted between stories set in the past and SF. Although, as he points out, "some of my books that are not billed as historical novels, like *Anathem* [which deals with the deepest currents of intellectual life on the planet of Arbre], have a kind of long history vibe about them."

A linking theme in all his books, though, is that he often writes about people who have an involvement in science and technology. Aurora is no different. Undercutting the sexism inherent in so many depictions of female spies, portrayals where sensuality and trauma are in close proximity, she's a problem-solving pragmatist who's fascinated by the latest developments – such as high-altitude balloons that, in the 1930s, enabled pioneers to travel high into the stratosphere, in part to research cosmic rays. "Ballooning has come to seem old-fashioned, kind of steampunky, and something that you do for a lark on a vacation trip, but it's a serious business," Stephenson says.

Plenty can go wrong when you ascend so high. The balloon can ice up. Conversely, the sun can heat it up so that it starts to ascend faster. Lose control and the balloon can yo-yo or go into a spin. There's not enough air to breathe. It all sounds terrifying. "Yeah, *yeah*," agrees Stephenson. "It doesn't quite have the drama of sitting on top of a rocket spewing flames, but it had all of the danger, all of the excitement." It was, he says, a "space race" that, as much as the competition to put astronauts in orbit or on the Moon, was "inextricably connected to the competition between two economic and political systems".

THE PETER PRINCIPAL

The next book in the sequence will focus on a different character: an adventurer journalist, Owen. He's a character based in part on 007 creator Ian Fleming's older brother, Peter. "If you read about Ian Fleming, Ian was kind of the loser who kept getting in trouble and screwing up," says Stephenson. "Peter was the person that everyone, schoolteachers and so on, thought was the guy who was going to succeed and do well."

Stephenson divides his time between writing and being involved in future-facing businesses. Currently, he's also chairman of Lamina1, "a blockchain project to make a sort of infrastructure for an open, decentralised metaverse", and is involved in a start-up, Whenere, "which is using game engine technology to create numerous story worlds".

So what does the man who came up with the term "metaverse" in 1992's *Snow Crash* think about its progress? Many people, he says, already spend a lot of time in the metaverse, in that "massively multiplayer alternate world technology" is central to gamers' lives. Because "flat screens are here to stay", we won't spend our time with devices strapped to our faces – or, he adds, find ourselves in a dystopian world that owes its aesthetics to *Blade Runner*.

Coming from someone strongly associated with cyberpunk, this is at the very least amusing, we suggest. "Well, yeah, but having been around [cyberpunk] for so long, I think I've seen enough to have some opinions."

Polostan is published by The Borough Press on 26 September.

BIODATA

From **Fort Meade, Maryland**

Greatest Hits
Stephenson first gained wide recognition for his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992). His Baroque cycle (2003-2004) dealt with the early Enlightenment, but still won multiple SF awards. More recently, *Termination Shock* (2021) was set in a near-future where climate change is starting to bite.

Random Fact
Stephenson had "mixed feelings" about *Oppenheimer*. "I would have liked to see more about the physics and the bomb, and less about his bureaucratic difficulties."

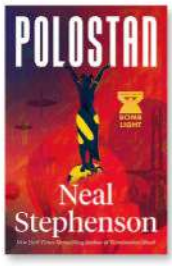

PHOTO BY CHELSEA L AUREN/SHUTTERSTOCK

> “Armies were just lots of dudes walking around carrying heavy rifles”

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edited by Ian Berriman

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ALIEN: ROMULUS

Killing station

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→ Greek mythology gets a modern-day update in this kooky, star-studded new Netflix show.

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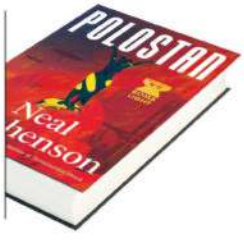
→ Three outrageously wild ’90s movies by Álex de la Iglesia get the box set treatment.



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POLOSTAN
→ Hugo, Clarke and Locus Award winner Neal Stephenson launches his new series Bomb Light.

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"Bit odd that this genetics lab has pulse rifles, really."

ALIEN: ROMULUS

Crime And Relative Dimensions In Space

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 119 minutes

Director **Fede Alvarez**

Cast **Cailee Spaeny, David Jonsson, Archie Renaux, Isabela Merced**

Given how much of the publicity for the seventh *Alien* film focused on how it was "set in-between *Alien* and *Aliens*" (yes, we plead guilty), it may surprise people that it probably has as much in common with *Alien Resurrection* as it does James Cameron's celebrated sequel. The entry it shares the most DNA with, however, is Ridley Scott's 1979 original – in ways that are for the most part a cause for celebration, but occasionally questionable.

Romulus looks just right, every battered texture and primitive computer graphic evincing a meticulous level of care. However, the biggest callback – which we won't spoil here – seems rather unnecessary, and threatens to overshadow director Fede Alvarez and co-writer Rodo Sayagues's original creations.

That it doesn't is testament to the strength of the film's central relationship: the bond between Rain (Cailee Spaeny), a young colonist desperate to escape a hardscrabble life on a gloomy mining colony, and the damaged android Andy (David Jonsson), her companion since childhood. Analogous to a sister protective of a sibling with a learning disability, it's a refreshingly original and beautifully played human/synthetic dynamic, and *Romulus* is at its best when negotiating its various twists and turns. Not since Ripley comforted a traumatised Newt has this franchise displayed such touching tenderness.

> **"It's a beautifully played human/synthetic dynamic"**

Mind you, it does feel like that's where all the hard work went, character-wise. You'd be hard-pressed to name the other four twentysomethings accompanying the pair on a mission to salvage cryostasis chambers from a drifting Weyland-Yutani research station – or provide a biography, beyond "She's pregnant" or "That cocky bloke who keeps saying things like 'arsehole' and 'twat'".

The plot boils down to one word: survival. And in the latter stages, it can start to feel like playing level 20 of a videogame where, having skipped the cut scenes, you're unclear *why* exactly it was necessary to head this way, then that, then climb that lift shaft.

Still, Sayagues and Alvarez deserve praise for the way that they open out the mythology by reconsidering questions that have been niggling fans for decades.

Ever wondered what happens between a chestburster scuttling across the floor and a drone emerging from the shadows? Here a satisfyingly icky explanation is supplied. Plus there's an ingenious solution to the problem of fighting creatures with acidic blood – one which beats just forgetting about it whenever a character who's *not* disposable needs to shoot one...

A perfect organism? No. But as *Alien* sequels go, *Romulus* has a curious mind, and a surprisingly big heart. **Ian Berriman**

i The scavengers' spaceship, Corbelan IV, is named after a character in Joseph Conrad's 1904 novel *Nostromo*.

STRANGE DARLING

★★★★☆

RELEASED 20 SEPTEMBER
18 | 97 minutes
Director **JT Mollner**
Cast **Willa Fitzgerald, Kyle Gallner, Barbara Hershey, Ed Begley Jr**

It's probably best if you don't know anything about the plot of this film before watching it. So let's just say it's a cat-and-mouse thriller that's been chopped up and re-ordered, its six chapters playing out of chronological order to deliberately wrongfoot you.

Stars Kyle Gallner and Willa Fitzgerald are both excellent, managing to ground all of the film's heightened drama in an emotional reality of sorts. Between them, they make even the most mundane moments feel compelling, even urgent.

The script itself is a little overwrought, and its pieces don't quite fit together properly – this is one of those films you'll talk about on the journey home and find yourself going "But wait, how did she..." – but it feels satisfying enough while you're watching it.

What really makes *Strange Darling* feel special is the way it looks. The opening credits include a proud announcement that the entire film was shot on 35mm, and director JT Mollner and director of photography Giovanni Ribisi (yes, the beloved character actor) really make the most of it.

Several key scenes are drenched in vivid blue or red neon lights, and there's some gorgeous split diopter business along the way too. Is it the best thriller of the year? Maybe not quite up to that standard, but it's definitely a contender for the best-looking.

Sarah Dobbs

THE SUBSTANCE

Help The Aged

★★★★☆

RELEASED 20 SEPTEMBER
18 | 141 minutes
Director **Coralie Fargeat**
Cast **Demi Moore, Margaret Qualley, Dennis Quaid, Joseph Balderrama**

From *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?* to *X*, Hollywood has often found horror in ageing women, and Coralie Fargeat's body horror satirises how, despite the best efforts of the body positivity movement, society still finds women who dare to mature in public distasteful.

The Substance sees a perfectly cast Demi Moore playing Elisabeth Sparkle, a TV fitness guru who is relieved of her duties once she has aged out of being an aspirational figure. In a moment of desperation, she orders the titular substance, which promises to transform her into "a better version of yourself. Younger, more beautiful, more perfect." After a particularly hard-to-watch spinal injection, Sue (Margaret Qualley) slithers out of her back, ready to be the youthful version of Elizabeth everyone wants to see.

> **"Spirals into some truly unhinged directions"**

As a sci-fi concept, it doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. The pair can only be conscious one at a time and only swap places for a week, and feeding tubes and further injections must be employed. Yet Sue is in no real sense a better version of Elisabeth, the pair don't share a consciousness, and Elisabeth doesn't regain any of her power or dignity through Sue's success.

The pair quickly become rivals and set on destroying one another, and the film spirals into some truly unhinged directions and body horror flourishes. The final act truly loses the plot, making little sense given the pre-established lore, but it's so over the top that you have to admire Fargeat's gumption.

Even if *The Substance* is not always logical or coherent, it's still stylish, funny and a genuinely unpredictable riot. **Leila Latif**

i Ray Liotta was originally cast as sleazy executive Harvey. Dennis Quaid stepped in after the actor's untimely passing.

BROKEN BIRD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
TBC | 96 minutes
Director **Joanne Mitchell**
Cast **Rebecca Calder, Sacharissa Claxton, Jay Taylor, Robyn Rainford**

This British indie is a peculiar kettle of fish. It has elements which, when listed, should surely qualify it as a full-blooded horror: a dash of *Frankenstein*; a spoonful of necrophilia; a soupçon of Poe. But it doesn't feel like that.

Expanded from a short by director Joanne Mitchell, it was scripted by *Emmerdale*'s Dominic Brunt (also Mitchell's husband). It centres on Sybil (Rebecca Calder), a lonely fantasist who works as an undertaker's assistant, whose status as a kook on the Log Lady/Norman Bates continuum is signalled early on when we see her collecting some roadkill.

A parallel storyline concerns a troubled cop (Sacharissa Claxton) whose young son died in a tragic accident. Quite how their stories intersect is one puzzle. What Sybil's avuncular new boss (*The Vicar Of Dibley*'s James Fleet) keeps in a locked cold storage room is another. Neither are that hard to crack.

It's a film that struggles to commit to a tone. At times the script seems to be striving for plausible realism and empathisable psychology. But it also has some bizarre ideas about how the police operate. And at other points it seems to be straining at the leash to enter some Lynchian hinterland.

Broken Bird has its moments – most of them Sybil's fantasies of romance or vengeance – but for too much of the duration it feels like it's aimlessly flapping about. **Calvin Baxter**

"See this barrel? That's the bottom, alright."

BORDERLANDS

Pandora explorers

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 101 minutes

Director **Eli Roth**

Cast **Cate Blanchett, Kevin Hart, Jack Black, Ariana Greenblatt**

The fears of many gamers that the long-gestating film version of Gearbox's beloved looter-shooter franchise would be unworthy of its inspiration are sadly realised by this haphazard sci-fi comedy.

Directed, somewhat randomly, by *Hostel*'s Eli Roth, it's an anarchic jaunt to the lawless planet of Pandora that retains the original's vault-hunting premise and elements of its gameplay.

Yet fans won't recognise siren Lilith in Cate Blanchett's jaded bounty hunter, while casting Kevin Hart as beefcake soldier Roland is a wittier gag than any to be found within the movie itself.

The fact that Jack Black supplies the voice for wisecracking WALL-E-alike Claptrap suggests that the film's creators had one eye on 2017's *Jumanji* reboot while crafting this tale of bickering bandits on the trail of buried alien riches.

The result, though, seems more akin to 1995 misfire *Tank Girl*, thanks in part to a spirited turn from *Barbie*'s Ariana Greenblatt as Tiny Tina, a precocious tween who couples bunny ears with exploding teddy bears. As her masked protector Krieg, Florian Munteanu gets to wield a buzz-axe and yell gonzo bon mots. That most of them are incomprehensible may be a blessing in disguise.

Mark Samuels

i Cate Blanchett's eldest son, a keen drummer, helped her to spin her Vladof Infinity pistol like an Old West gunslinger.

MEGALOPOLIS

Apocalypse Soon

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 SEPTEMBER

TBC | 138 minutes

Director **Francis Ford Coppola**

Cast **Adam Driver, Aubrey Plaza, Giancarlo Esposito, Nathalie Emmanuel, Shia LaBeouf**

Francis Ford Coppola returns to directing, 13 years after his last film, horror/mystery *Twixt*, with this wildly ambitious political sci-fi – his answer to *Citizen Kane* and *Metropolis*.

Set in the near-future, it centres on Adam Driver's Cesar Catilina, an architect living in New Rome who dreams of creating a utopia: Megalopolis. Having the ability to control time, and access to a unique building substance named "megalon", Catilina must face off with various enemies who want to see him come to harm – notably Mayor Franklyn Cicero (Giancarlo Esposito), whose daughter Julia (Nathalie Emmanuel) has become romantically involved with the architect. Others out to bring Catilina down include Shia LaBeouf's extravagant cross-dressing socialite and Jon Voight's ageing banker, while there are further entanglements, with Catilina involved with TV reporter Wow Platinum (Aubrey Plaza).

Dealing with themes of power and corruption, and how an empire (in this case the USA) falls to its knees, Coppola is keen to compare this near-future world with Ancient Rome. Scenes abound of orgiastic partying, toga-wearing and declamatory dialogue that references some of the great writers and thinkers over the past 2,000 years.

A film that's both innovative and flawed, *Megalopolis* shows Coppola relentlessly pursuing an artistic vision. It's bold in places – at the film's Cannes screening there was even a moment of live, interactive theatre. While the visual effects are first-rate, what disappoints is the film's sci-fi element, as Catilina's uncanny abilities don't particularly play out with any significance – beyond the moment when he kisses Julia, freezing time in mid-air as they stand on a girder above the city.

"Will you stop arsing about with that kaleidoscope?"

Still, with the ensemble including Dustin Hoffman, Jason Schwartzman and Laurence Fishburne, there's an embarrassment of riches present to serve Coppola's sometimes brilliant, sometimes bonkers film. It's impossible not to marvel at his chutzpah. **James Mottram**

i Coppola originally conceived of *Megalopolis* in 1977, as he was wrapping up shooting on *Apocalypse Now*.

STARVE ACRE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 SEPTEMBER

15 | 98 minutes

Director **Daniel Kokotajlo**

Cast **Matt Smith, Morfydd Clark, Erin Richards, Arthur Shaw**

Daniel Kokotajlo's adaptation of Andrew Michael Hurley's folk horror novel is a heady, heavy timeslip of a film that perfectly evokes its '70s setting.

Matt Smith and Morfydd Clark are Richard and Jules, a young couple grappling with the death of their son Owen. As grief overwhelms the pair, Richard buries himself in his work as an archaeologist, where he uncovers both the roots of a nearby ancient oak and some troubling facts about his late father. Meanwhile, Jules turns to a local occultist for help – a decision that goes about as well as you'd expect.

Starve Acre has atmosphere to spare, aided by Matthew Herbert's overbearing score and the beautiful North Yorkshire locations. Both Smith and Clark are excellent, the former visibly sagging under the weight of his grief, while the latter grows increasingly unnerving.

Meanwhile, the *other* main character – a strange hare that may represent the reincarnated Owen or something far more sinister – begins to take hold of their lives.

It's creepy stuff, with elements of *Blood On Satan's Claw*, *Don't Look Now* and *Hereditary*. As with Ari Aster's film, however, the more it reveals about the supernatural forces at work here, the less interesting it gets, leading to an ending that's effective, but just a bit too neat. **Will Salmon**

BLINK TWICE

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 103 minutes

Director **Zoë Kravitz**

Cast **Naomi Ackie, Channing Tatum, Alia Shawkat, Geena Davis**

"Beware of billionaires bearing gifts" would be an appropriate tagline for this discomfiting horror-thriller, a Jordan Peele-style exercise in excruciating tension that doubles as a razor-sharp articulation of righteous post-#MeToo fury.

Directed and co-written by Zoë Kravitz, it follows struggling waitress Frida (Naomi Ackie), who accepts an offer from Channing Tatum's charismatic tech mogul to join him on his paradisiacal private island. Once ensconced there, Frida soon intuits that all is not what it seems, with the staff's disconcerting behaviour and inexplicable memory lapses contributing to her suspicion that the vacation of her dreams is really the stuff of nightmares.

The ghouls of Bill Cosby, Jeffrey Epstein and Harvey Weinstein cast long shadows over Kravitz's directorial debut, which also mirrors the likes of *Triangle Of Sadness* and TV's *The White Lotus* in the way it skewers the idle rich. Yet *Blink Twice* still manages to squeeze some surprises from its *Stepford Wives*-like scenario, not least in the way it nimbly revises some clichéd genre tropes.

It's refreshing, for example, to see Frida and fellow "guest" Sarah (*Andor*'s Adria Arjona) become allies rather than rivals for Tatum's affections. And while the film's ending feels slightly deflating, it still has an abundance of humour, daring and intelligence. **Neil Smith**

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KAOS Season One

Acropolis Now

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
- Creator **Charlie Covell**
- Cast **Jeff Goldblum, Janet McTeer, Cliff Curtis, David Thewlis**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Hang on, who's** forgotten to put Percy in the new series of *Percy Jackson And The Olympians*? And blimey, the Gods have suddenly become very foul-mouthed.

Ah, right, this is *Kaos*, a different TV series about squabbling gods from Greek mythology transposed to the modern world. And this one's not for the kids, with its constant cussing, casual kinkiness and occasional gore. All of which is offset by an offbeat comedy tone that veers between Terry Gilliam and Barry Sonnenfeld.

Kaos is set in an alternate reality contemporary Greece where the populace still worship the very real pantheon of Greek Gods. Jeff Goldblum plays a neurotic Zeus who fears that humans are losing respect for him, and so plans a few natural disasters to remind them who's boss.

But Prometheus (Stephen Dillane) – despite being chained to a rock face and having his liver pecked out every day by an eagle – has set in motion a long-gestating plan that could end in Zeus's downfall. A plan that starts with Zeus noticing a new wrinkle in his brow.

The plan also requires the destinies of three humans to converge: Eurydice (Aurora Perrineau), wife of musician Orpheus (if you know your Greek myths, you can guess where she ends up); Caneus (Misia Butler), a diver who helps the newly dead to cross the river Lethe; and Ariadne (Leila Farzad), daughter of Minos, the ruler of Krete.

All this is just the bare bones of a labyrinthine televisual confection that includes David Thewlis as an overworked Hades in a monochrome underworld of Soviet brutalist architecture, three transgender Fates (including Suzy Eddie Izzard), three biker Furies, and Billie Piper spouting prophecies that nobody believes as Cassandra. Then there's Orpheus as a wannabe Chris Martin (honestly, the wimpy song he performs makes Coldplay sound like Motorhead), the Minotaur, lots of divine slaughter and a marvellously dour Medusa (Debi Mazar).

It's certainly ambitious, star-studded, elegant-looking and a lot of fun, but there's a distracting, uneven tonal quality to *Kaos* that prevents it being a fully satisfying watch. There are some brutal moments – especially a baby-killing scene – that sit uncomfortably alongside the goofy weirdness; sure, they're obviously meant to shock, but in context they just feel distasteful.

Anyone up for a *Meet The Parents* reboot?

> "A little too self-aware about its kookiness"

Even Goldblum seems unsure whether he should go full Goldblum or rein it in a bit, as if he's unclear what level the show's being pitched at.

Ultimately, *Kaos* isn't chaos so much as micromanaged madness, with a sense that it's a little too self-aware about its kookiness. But every episode has a few great little moments, so if you can put up with Orpheus being such an emotionally needy dick (it's tricky), it's certainly more fun than rolling a rock up a hill for eternity.

Dave Golder

i The cat that Dionysus inherits from Orpheus is called Dennis – a name that literally means "a follower of Dionysus".

TERMINATOR ZERO Season One

★★★½☆

- UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Mattson Tomlin**
- UK voice cast **Rosario Dawson, Timothy Olyphant, André Holland, Sonoya Mizuno**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The single best** idea for where to take the *Terminator* franchise since *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* comes in the form of this anime crafted by *Ghost In The Shell* studio Production IG. It's far from perfect, but by the end you're praying for a live-action adaptation rather than another *Salvation*, *Genisys* or *Dark Fate*.

Set in Tokyo just before Judgment Day in 1997 (with various flash-forwards), the story focuses on scientist Malcolm Lee, who has become aware of Skynet's imminent threat, and is creating his own AI to combat it. Trouble is, future Skynet's got wind of this, and does what Skynet does... sends back a Terminator.

This may sound like same old same old, but to reveal more would be to set in motion a domino effect of spoilers. Let's just say that for four episodes it's pretty much *Terminator* with a hint of *Ghost In The Shell*, then suddenly it takes off in a whole new direction with a mindwarpingly philosophical approach to time travel.

Sadly, some of the visuals let things down. There's some shockingly poor CG, along with underwhelming action scenes and moments that are clearly meant to achieve Mamoru Oshii-style impressionistic beauty but are laughably on-the-nose. However, the powerful underlying story keeps it watchable. **Dave Golder**

THE WALKING DEAD: DEAD CITY

★★★½☆

UK **Sky Max/NOW, Thursdays**
US **AMC, streaming now**
Showrunners **Scott Gimple, Eli Jorné**
Cast **Lauren Cohan, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Gaius Charles, Željko Ivanek**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Another**

Walking Dead spin-off finally makes it to the UK. *Dead City* focuses on unlikely allies Maggie (Lauren Cohan) and Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) as the two venture into the derelict New York City in search of the former's son, who's been abducted by the evil Croat (Željko Ivanek).

Negan went on a real journey over the last few seasons of the original show. Morgan's performance was always excellent, but it was sometimes hard to convincingly join the dots between the sadistic killer that Negan was and the regretful loner that he became. *Dead City* probes at that and attempts to bring its two leads to a point of, if not friendship, then a greater understanding of each other.

It's good, dramatic stuff that gives Morgan the chance to bring a bit of the old violent showman Negan back, while also leading to a finale that makes it clear that not all is forgiven between the two, as it surely never can be.

While Morgan and Cohan remain solid leads, the supporting cast is thinly drawn. Ivanek gives a creepy enough performance, but the Croat is a fairly bland villain. The New York setting, too, feels underexplored. Still, with season two on the way, there's time to develop this evocative fallen Manhattan. **Will Salmon**

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

Season Two

Green & Blacks

★★★☆☆

UK **Sky Atlantic/NOW, streaming now**
US **Max, streaming now**
Showrunner **Ryan Condal**
Cast **Emma D'Arcy, Matt Smith, Olivia Cooke, Rhys Ifans**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 ***House Of The Dragon***'s second season ends so abruptly that it feels necessary to reiterate that eight episodes really is the extent of the run. The epic denouement teased throughout is conspicuous by its absence, resulting in a frustrating and anticlimactic finale. Season three will *have* to start with a bang...

The decision to leave so many plotlines unresolved is bizarre, particularly in a show so leisurely paced. The two squabbling Targaryen factions (King Aegon's Greens and Queen Rhaenyra's Blacks) spend the conversation-heavy season engaged in a medieval Cold War, only coming to *Game Of Thrones*-scale blows in brilliant fourth episode "The Red Dragon And The Gold".

Perhaps the impending confrontation was postponed because the season's budget was maxed out on the dragons, which are plentiful, spectacular and everything fans of George RR Martin's world could have hoped for. Even so, many of the more memorable moments come when the storytelling is pared back, giving characters the chance to talk one-on-one in candle-lit castle chambers.

Emma D'Arcy and Olivia Cooke play rival queens Rhaenyra and Alicent with significantly more nuance than your average Westerosi ruler, while in the sadistic Prince Aemond (Ewan Mitchell) the show has found a credible successor to infamous bad 'uns Joffrey Baratheon and Ramsay Bolton.

As a prequel, however, *House Of The Dragon* has yet to fully justify its existence, its "*Dallas* with dragons" family feuds feeling disappointingly small next to *Game Of Thrones*' battle for the Iron Throne. **Richard Edwards**

i House Tully's ranks include Grover, Elmo, Kermit and Oscar. GRRM collaborator Elio M García Jr confirmed it's a Muppets gag.

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY

Season Four

★★★★½

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Showrunner **Steve Blackman**
Cast **David Castañeda, Elliot Page, Justin H Min, Ritu Arya**

EPISODES 4.01-4.06 **What's this?**

Another apocalypse? Sheesh, those bickering Umbrella Academy siblings can't catch a break. At least this final adventure offers an explanation for their bad luck – and unlike last season's claustrophobic confinement to a weird hotel, they get to travel. Although it's still weird, of course: one (excellent) episode is dedicated to life in a dimension-hopping underground train network.

We pick up with the team – now minus superpowers – living ordinary lives in a slightly different timeline than the one in which we first met them. All is well until a weird cult, led by Megan Mullally and Nick Offerman's peculiar husband-and-wife duo, figure out that things are a bit wrong and decide to set the timeline straight. Apocalypse now! Or not, if our heroes manage to cease squabbling long enough to stop the big boom.

As always, the show's insane set-pieces are offset by emotional character moments – Lila and Diego's marriage difficulties, for example, or Klaus struggling with his lack of immortality. It's all beautifully delivered, with superb effects and a rousing, no-going-back finale. But we can't help but mourn the absolute bedlam of *The Umbrella Academy*'s first few years. **Jayne Nelson**

"Twenty tubes of Savlon, or the girl gets it."

LOVE, DEATH & APOCALYPSE

Pain in Spain, mainly deranged

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED 23 SEPTEMBER

1993/1995/1997 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Álex de la Iglesia**

Cast **Antonio Resines, Álex Angulo, Armando De Razza, Santiago Segura, Rosie Perez, Javier Bardem**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Although Álex de la** Iglesia's filmography has 17 titles, he's still best known for the first three – collected in this box set. Their scabrous blend of black humour, violence and the grotesque attached the jump-leads to Spanish cinema, kicking open doors for other genre filmmakers.

The *2000 AD*-esque *Accion Mutante* sets the tone – in de la Iglesia's words, "weaponised frivolity". It follows a bumbling group of disabled terrorists – including conjoined twins and a chap with a flying wheelchair – who spit on beauty standards, shooting up a TV aerobics show and assassinating bodybuilders.

After kidnapping a billionaire's daughter, they head for another planet in a scrappunk spaceship, their scar-faced leader thinning the group's numbers en route in anticipation of the ransom. Though the juxtaposition of machine-gun slaughter and perky '60s pop is a hoot, it's the lovingly detailed production design that most impresses; it's clear the work of Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro was a major inspiration (and indeed the effects team from *Delicatessen* were involved).

> **"A blend of black humour, violence and the grotesque"**

Omen-style shockers get a perverse twist in *The Day Of The Beast*, which teams a theologian convinced the Antichrist's birth is imminent with a doofus metalhead and a TV psychic.

Opening with highly amusing sequences of the priest committing a string of sins – like stealing a dying man's wallet – and making good use of Madrid landmarks, it's a madcap farce with cartoonish slapstick violence aplenty, let down only by a fumbled climax. Logic dictates that the heroes should kill a baby; it seems the director chickened out.

Though its Tex-Mex milieu is extremely heightened, *Perdito Durango* is essentially a crime thriller. Based on a companion novel to *Wild At Heart*, its focus is the animalistic amour fou of a pair of sociopathic lovers (Javier Bardem and Rosie Perez) hired to transport a truckload of human foetuses. Bardem is impressively demonic (if borderline unintelligible), but while the film's not without humour, there isn't enough to leaven the relentless rape and torture. Exhaustingly mean-spirited, it's one for people who consider *Natural Born Killers* the best Tarantino film.

Extras The most sizeable bonus is *Heirs Of The Beast* (2016), a feature-length doc on *Day*. This proves a bit long-winded, with only 24 of 81 minutes dedicated to production. The ending originally planned (involving 5,000 priests, sackfuls of babies, and Satan's arsehole) sounds much better!

A 1993 TV special on *Accion* (28 minutes) offers behind-the-scenes footage from an impressive number of set-ups, picking out details which don't register in the film. Also interesting is "Mirindas Asesinas" (13 minutes), the expressionist B&W short which helped de la Iglesia get his break.

A clutch of interviews are ported over from Severin's 2021 US releases. The director discusses all three films (18/28/28 minutes), in likeably good-humoured fashion. Also having their say on *Accion* are the writer, the leading man, an effects guy and the production designers (totalling 62 minutes).

Day gets two cast and the DOP (40 minutes). For *Perdita* we hear from author Barry Gifford, the composer, and the DOP (44 minutes); there's also a grimly fascinating talking head (18 minute) on the gruesome real-life crimes that were a key inspiration.

A "visual essay" on *Day* (nine minutes) and an "appreciation" of *Perdita* (13 minutes) respectively overstate the political subtext and state the obvious, but a piece on the director (29 minutes) usefully explains in what respects these films are typically Spanish.

All three films get new scholarly commentaries. Beware: may feature the word "syntax"... *Accion* adds an old track teaming the director and various crew. Plus: *Accion* storyboards (two minutes); a music video; trailers; galleries; three sided posters; nine art cards; booklet.

Ian Berriman

i In *Accion Mutante*, the face of the robot priest featured in the wedding party scene was based on Álex de la Iglesia.

"Gottle of geer, gottle of geer." "This isn't working."

THE DELIVERANCE

Holy hell

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Lee Daniels**

Cast **Andra Day, Glenn Close, Mo'Nique, Caleb McLaughlin**

NETFLIX **Logically, if you believe** in the antiChrist, you also believe that Christ exists too, and in Lee Daniels's *The Deliverance*, the message is clear: when Satan comes a-knockin, it's time to find Jesus.

Inspired by a true story, it sees struggling mother Ebony (Andra Day) and her brood, along with her cancer-ridden mom Alberta (Glenn Close, whose styling choices and blaccent need to be seen to be believed), tormented in their new home by nefarious spiritual forces. Their only hope lies in letting the Lord into their hearts.

Daniels, who is better known for heartwrenching tragedies like *Monster's Ball* and *Precious*, proves far more adept at non-demonic cruelty, where family members hiss cruel judgements at one another. When we get into the supernatural aspects Glenn Close is relieved of the last fragments of her dignity, and it all feels rather tamer. Threats of a beating or calling child protective services on one another cut deeper than the *Exorcist*-lite ravings of the possessed.

Daniels may want audiences to get themselves to church, but the most compelling argument this film presents in favour of doing so is that it might be a more enjoyable way to spend two hours.

Leila Latif

i The Indiana home of Latoya Ammons, the mother in the real life case, was demolished back in 2016.

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK

2 Fast 2 Furyan

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 16 SEPTEMBER

2004 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **David Twohy**

Cast **Vin Diesel, Thandie Newton, Karl Urban, Colm Feore**

2000's *Pitch Black* was a lean, *Alien*-indebted survival tale, a cult hit on a modest budget. As its portentous title suggests, this more fantasy-inclined sequel is out to build not just a franchise but a whole mythology, inflating the universe of the first film and elevating its taciturn hero to the stuff of prophecy-fulfilling legend.

The stakes are raised, the scale almost as epic as star Vin Diesel's triceps. As all-conquering empire the Necromongers besiege the galaxy, director David Twohy delivers early CG spectacle – still holding up remarkably well, given that it's 20 years old – along with genuinely striking production design that recalls the baroque excesses of David Lynch's *Dune*.

"It's *still* pitch black in here." "Erm... no, never mind."

But the worldbuilding is muddled, while a diversion on a prison planet leaves the movie's midsection flabby. Diesel makes for a persuasive cosmic badass, but at times you can't help wishing for the kind of twinkle arch-rival the Rock might have given those unearthly silver eyes.

Extras Completists rejoice: this three-disc set includes the Theatrical Cut, an open matte 1.78:1 ratio version, and Twohy's longer Director's Cut (which comes with two old commentaries).

Brand new special features include an insightful, feature-length retrospective on the making of the movie, with contributions from Twohy and cast and crew; alas, Mr Diesel is a no-show, but it's peppered with behind-the-scenes footage (74 minutes). From the same interview sessions there are standalone chats with Twohy (14 minutes), storyboard artist Brian Murray (11 minutes) and actor Keith David (10 minutes).

Discs two and three present a host of archival bonuses, including featurettes, deleted scenes, a Sci-Fi Channel special, and cut-scenes from tie-in videogame *Escape From Butcher Bay* (totalling a whopping 239 minutes). Plus: a booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i A statue of a knight atop a Necromonger spaceship bears a likeness of David Twohy – at the director's request.

THE VOURDALAK

Tolstoy Story

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 16 SEPTEMBER

2023 | 15 | Download

Director **Adrien Beau**

Cast **Kacey Mottet Klein, Ariane Labed, Grégoire Colin, Vassili Schneider**

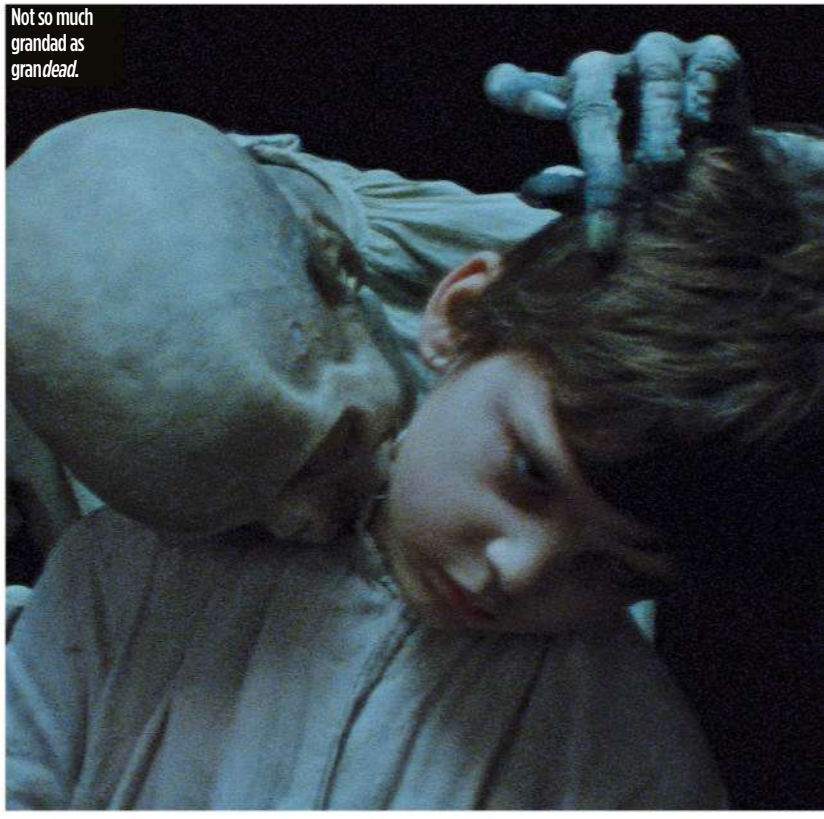
Written by AK Tolstoy, "The Family Of The Vourdalak" is a significant piece of 19th century vampire fiction. The tale sees a French courtier recalling events in a Serbian village in 1759: taking shelter with a peasant family, he witnesses the return of their elderly patriarch Gorcha in the form of a Vourdalak – a bloodsucker from Slavic folklore that preys on loved ones.

This French-language adaptation makes a significant number of changes, with decidedly mixed results. Some are positive: the Marquis becomes a painted-faced poltroon, hopelessly out of his depth; Kacey Mottet Klein's performance is amusingly effete.

Others are debatable: the object of the Marquis's desire, Sdenka, is no longer a shy young innocent, but – perhaps more interestingly – an intense figure, a cracked goth prone to Kate Bush-esque dance moves. The story's two most memorable moments are also reimagined, and not for the better.

Most questionable of all is the depiction of the Vourdalak, using puppetry. The story demands a level of ambiguity about whether Gorcha has "turned". But it's never in doubt with this zombie-like, near-skeletal figure, so obviously fake as to be comical. So while this adaptation's offbeat touches hold some appeal, it fundamentally doesn't make sense. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ "The Family Of The Vourdalak" was also adapted as part of Mario Bava's 1963 anthology horror *Black Sabbath*.



Not so much grandad as gran*dead*.

LORE

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | SVOD

ICON Playing like a modern take on an Amicus portmanteau horror, this anthology sees a group of hikers trading literal campfire tales.

Assorted directors deliver a consistently entertaining mix of tones on a modest budget, from a demonic warehouse encounter to an atmospheric haunted house story. A serial killer's geek-slaying rampage in an empty multiplex has a pinch of Edgar Wright, but it's the tale of a wannabe swinger's ghastly fate that truly nails the blend of black comedy and chills. **Nick Setchfield**

LAST STRAW

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 SEPTEMBER

2024 | 15 | Download

Who knew mopeds could be so menacing? A young waitress is working the night shift at a roadside diner when a crew of miscreants shows up to wreak havoc. Intimidation turns to violence, but just when you think you've seen it all before, the movie veers off course to become much more interesting.

A perspective shift changes everything, and what could've been a generic thriller becomes a furious indictment of American culture. The delivery is heavy-handed, but the sentiment's hard to disagree with. **Sarah Dobbs**

JACKPOT!

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 16+ | SVOD

PRIME VIDEO In a near-future California the state lottery comes with a catch: the public can kill the winner and claim their prize money. It's the kind of ironic, gleefully violent set-up that could have powered a vintage *2000 AD* story, but director Paul Feig plays it strictly for laughs.

Awkwafina's the target of the mob, John Cena the charming lunk pledged to protect her. The manic *Tom & Jerry* energy of it all ultimately exhausts, but the zinger-loaded screenplay is gold. **Nick Setchfield**

THE BEAST WITHIN

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Download

This British horror sees a young girl uncovering a grisly family secret: shackled in their remote rural home, her father succumbs to the werewolf's curse when the moon is full.

A tangibly creepy sense of place, some handsome photography and an assured performance by young lead Caoilinn Springall help build the dread. *Game Of Thrones*' Kit Harington is essentially the ultimate Scary Dad; despite the lycanthropic twist, the horror is rooted more in the human than the beast. **Nick Setchfield**

TIGON COLLECTION

Boris Sendoff

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1967/1968 | 15/15 | Blu-ray
Director **Michael Reeves/Vernon Sewell**
Cast **Boris Karloff, Christopher Lee, Ian Ogilvy, Barbara Steele**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **These latest** additions to 88 Films' Tigon range not only celebrate the most overlooked of the great British horror factories – the studio seen as scraping the bronze medal behind Hammer and Amicus – but mark the twilight of genre veteran Boris Karloff.

The Sorcerers ★★★☆☆ makes the most effective use of the fading icon, playing on his advancing years for a chiller rooted in generational anxiety. Karloff stars as a hypnotist who puppeteers Ian Ogilvy's louche young thrill-seeker through high-tech mind-control – with murderous consequences. Sixties London may be swinging but the film's overcast, down-at-heel aesthetic gives it a depressingly seedy edge, despite a memorably trippy sequence that feels remarkably like an early Pink Floyd lightshow.

Curse Of The Crimson Altar ★★★☆☆ came after but somehow feels more old-fashioned. Inspired by HP Lovecraft's "The Dreams In The Witch House" – though only a paternity test could prove it – it finds a clearly frail and ailing Karloff teamed with Christopher Lee for a tale that dilutes the cosmic horror of the original in favour of culty goings-on in an English country house.

It's a lurid but tepid effort that feels like endless set-up, though there's a kitsch appeal to Barbara Steele's green-skinned, ram-horned witch-queen, ruling what looks like a suburban sex dungeon. Karloff, in a wheelchair now, brings his name and a dignified turn but none of the true power of his legend.

Extras Bonus features on **The Sorcerers** ★★★★☆ include an interview with star Ian Ogilvy (23 minutes), who shares insights on Karloff and his own close relationship with director Michael Reeves, a man determined to create "the best rubbish we can possibly make".

Assistant cameraman Don Lord (eight minutes) recalls the film's psychedelic sequence, while editor David Woodward (13 minutes) looks back honestly at a penny-pinching baptism of fire. There are also astute commentaries by assorted critics: one by William Fowler and Vic Pratt, the other by Kim Newman and Sean Hogan. Plus: an extensive gallery; trailer; booklet.

Extras on **Curse Of The Crimson Altar** ★★★★☆ include a chat with editor Howard Lanning (18 minutes), which takes in fellow Tigon offerings *The Body Stealers* and *Haunted House Of Horror*, while Sean Hogan presents an engaging, informative look at the film's Lovecraftian origins (20 minutes).

A 2016 retrospective documentary gathers cast and crew, including stars Mark Eden and Virginia Wetherell – there are some wonderful, often heartbreaking reminiscences about Karloff, revealed to be no fan of the script but a consummate gent nonetheless. Newman and Hogan provide the commentary here. Plus: gallery; trailers; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

"I'm feeling quite horny." "Oh, don't kid around."

> "The most overlooked of the British horror factories"

Curse Of The Crimson Altar screenwriters Mervyn Haisman and Henry Lincoln created the Yeti for *Doctor Who*.

ORCA: THE KILLER WHALE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1977 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray/DVD/download
Director **Michael Anderson**
Cast **Richard Harris, Charlotte Rampling, Bo Derek, Will Sampson**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **When *Jaws*** chummed the waters in 1975 a cinematic feeding frenzy soon followed. This Dino De Laurentiis production makes its ambition clear in the opening moments, as a killer whale headbutts a great white shark. Move over, Bruce...

But this is *Jaws* in reverse. While Robert Shaw played the hunter in Spielberg's masterpiece, here fellow hellraiser Richard Harris becomes the hunted, targeted by a vengeful cetacean for the slaying of its pregnant mate. Essentially the whale is Ahab, and if you buy its preposterous vendetta you're firmly on its side, not least because Harris's sea dog is such an utter goon.

There's a constant tension between the film's B-movie leanings and something stranger and more poetic. Ennio Morricone delivers a melancholy score, and Ted Moore's truly exquisite cinematography is showcased to good effect by this restoration. The blend of animatronics and real animals is more accomplished than *Jaws*, even if the thrills don't begin to compare, while a climax among the polar ice floes feels genuinely mythic.

Extras Film journalist Philippe Guedj supplies the background and mounts a persuasive defence (29 minutes). The Blu-ray comes with four art cards. **Nick Setchfield**

CRAWLSPACE

A new lease of death

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 30 SEPTEMBER

1986 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **David Schmoeller**

Cast **Klaus Kinski, Talia Balsam, Barbara Whinnery, Carole Francis**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though this** reviewer believes in separating art from the artist, it's worth noting that the star of this trashy horror – a product of Charles Band's B-movie stable Empire Pictures – was a loathsome slug of a man. During his lifetime, Klaus Kinski was renowned for his volatile on-set behaviour; after his death, his daughter Pola accused him of sexually assaulting her from the age of five.

He's also the best thing about *Crawlspace*. As Karl Gunther, a landlord who spies on his female tenants, and murders people with ingenious devices (like a chair with a spring-loaded spike), Kinski is captivatingly deranged. Maybe it's because playing a sociopathic pervert wasn't much of a stretch.

The art department also deserves a nod, for creatively recycling the sets from Empire's *Troll*; the apartments have a degree of personality that suggests more care than you'd expect.

In other respects, the film misses the mark. Its shiny steel vents are preposterously capacious. The rats Gunther deploys to torment his targets look rather cute. And his habit of tapping a ball-bearing with a knife – improbably reliable at luring victims to their doom – proves irritating rather than sinister. While *Crawlspace* has some sicko yuks, it's no match for writer/director David Schmoeller's finest hour, 1979's *Tourist Trap*.

Extras A commentary duo from the podcast *Schlockpit* don't shy away from addressing Kinski, with one declaring "Fuck me, what a piece of shit!". The director is of like mind in an interview (17 minutes), recalling how impossible the actor was to work with, to the point where a producer suggested having him killed... Schmoeller's 1999 short "Please Kill Mr Kinski" (nine minutes) covers much the same ground. A 47-minute "Making Of" actually turns out to be an extended rant by Kinski on topics such as his hatred of directors. Muffled sound and poor framing (Kinski insisted on not being able to see the camera!) make this a challenging watch... Plus: trailers; TV spots; gallery; poster. **Ian Berriman**

"Please come out, please." "Nah, it's safer in here."

i Star Tané McClure had three tracks on the *Terminator* soundtrack: "Burnin' In The Third Degree" played in the club scene.

YOU'RE NEXT

Family values

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2011 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Adam Wingard**

Cast **Sharni Vinson, Nicholas Tucci, Wendy Glenn, AJ Bowen**

On its original release, around the same time as *The Purge*, you may have swerved *You're Next* on the assumption that it was just a generic home invasion horror. And watching the first half hour, you might conclude you were right. But the longer the film goes on, the more it reveals its originality.

For one thing, it has a rich vein of dark humour. It boasts one of horror cinema's most impressively capable "Final Girls". And then there's the big twist which, thanks to some effective misdirection, you're unlikely to see coming.

Shot in Missouri, the film sees a middle class family assembling at an isolated mansion, partners in tow, to celebrate their parents' wedding anniversary. Then someone starts shooting at them with a crossbow. Soon the house is besieged by killers in animal masks. Fortunately, one of the girlfriends, Erin (Sharni Vinson), was raised by a survivalist, and can handle herself in this scenario even better than Macaulay Culkin.

Thanks in part to improv, the bickering dynamics of the siblings feel authentic. There's a wince-inducing array of physical damage, involving everything from razor wire to a sledgehammer and a food mixer. And the badassery of Erin's fightback supplies some satisfying punch-the-air moments.

Extras Six new interviews head up this Second Sight release. A team-up between director Adam Wingard and writer Simon Bassett (61 minutes) is the highlight, touching on everything from the influence of Donald Cammell's *White Of The Eye* to a toothache which had the director resorting to some expired painkillers for star Barbara Crampton's dog! The pair also supply a new commentary.

Other voices include two producers (23 minutes), the production designer (16 minutes), and three cast (28/17/14 minutes). A pseudish video essay (12 minutes) waffles on about "the dichotomy between binaries". Plus: an old Making Of (19 minutes); a second cast/crew commentary; seven animated storyboards for violent set-pieces. (five minutes). A Limited Edition 4K set comes with a 120-page book and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

Trick-or-treaters *are* annoying, but come on.

i In the scene where Erin sets up a booby trap, the hand that lifts an axe into position belongs to producer Jess Wu Calder.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS ***Deep Sea*** • ***Despicable Me 4*** • ***The Exorcism*** • ***In A Violent Nature*** • ***The Present*** ***Sasquatch Sunset*** • ***Sky Peals*** (BFI Player, 23 September) • ***The Watched***

HOSTILE DIMENSIONS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | Download
Director **Graham Hughes**
Cast **Annabel Logan, Joma West, Josie Rogers, Paddy Kondracki**

A cult item of the future, this likeable Scottish indie makes more imaginative use of the concept of infinite alternate realities than some megabucks blockbusters we could mention.

When a graffiti artist goes missing after finding a free-standing door in a derelict building, documentarians Sam (Annabel Logan) and Ash (Joma West) decide to make her their next subject. Taking the door home, they discover that they can pass through it to different worlds – and navigate them, to a degree. But where did the door come from?

Though some of the dimensions we visit are distinctly low-budget – one is scattered with egg-like forms that are clearly a pack of party balloons – many are memorably oddball. Opening the door might reveal flying whales, a talking dog or a creepy panda that sprouts thrashing tendrils.

Hostel Dimensions also boasts a zesty demotic register, an effective twist, and latterly an exhilarating sense of events cascading out of control.

As is often the case with this genre, the found-footage framing often stretches credulity. And at times writer/director Graham Hughes could perhaps take a bit more time to unpack the logic underpinning this world. But it's vanishingly rare that a micro-budget effort like this *understays* its welcome.

Ian Berriman

FUNERAL HOME

An underwhelming undertaking

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 24 JUNE
1980 | 12 | Blu-ray
Director **William Fruet**
Cast **Kay Hawtrey, Lesleh Donaldson, Barry Morse, Dean Garbett**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This mild Canadian** horror is actually set in a *former* funeral home, whose owner Maude (Kay Hawtrey) has now converted it into a guest house. So while some of the morbid accoutrements of the undertaking business remain, now disused, their role isn't that prominent – well, until someone gets the wrong end of an embalming pump...

Maude's visiting granddaughter (Lesleh Donaldson) is our POV figure, as we're presented with various mysteries, including the discovery of a car in a hay pile, and the disappearance, many moons ago, of Maude's husband.

It's one of those horrors that seems to have been made by someone who's made a study of the genre, scribbling down notes (black cat, lightning flashes) but has no real feeling for making one. As the film sedately wends its way to a climax transparently derivative of one of the genre's all-time greats, there's little in the way of tension, and the kill scenes are disappointingly tame.

Extras 88 Films further supplement the US Shout Factory bonuses. Altogether there are seven in-vision interview pieces (totalling 117 minutes), featuring Donaldson and co-star Stephen Miller, plus the DOP, AD, first AD art director, set assistant and the producer's son. Fascinating tidbits are thin on the ground, but there are a couple of amusing anecdotes about exploding pickle jars and a sack of maggoty onions.

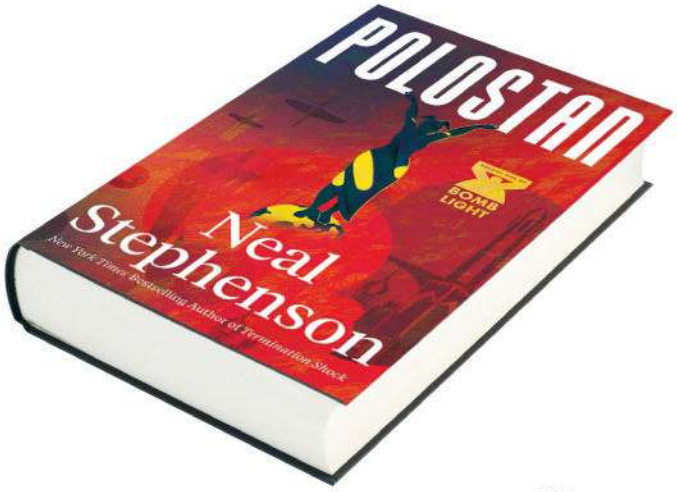
Three further stitched together audio interviews (Donaldson, the first AD, a production assistant – totalling 89 minutes) play out over the film – don't you hate it when they do that? So does a dry intro to bits of isolated score (53 minutes).

There are also two proper commentary tracks, by the team from podcast *The Hysteria Continues* and a pair of Canadian film historians. Plus: footage of the main location as it looks today (seven minutes); trailers; TV ads and radio spots; gallery. **Ian Berriman**

i One kill involves a car being rammed into a gorge. When the wreck is pulled out of the water, you can see that it has no engine.

ROUND UP

Anime legend Hayao Miyazaki's **THE BOY AND THE HERON** (23 September, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees a grieving Japanese boy lured into a spiritual world populated by the starving dead and the not yet born. We said: "There are images here as breathtaking as anything Miyazaki has drawn in his career." Extras include feature-length storyboards and interviews with the composer, a producer and the lead animator. Arthouse quirkfest **SASQUATCH SUNSET** (out now, Blu-ray) follows sasquatches living in a beautifully shot Californian forest. They eat. They sleep. They groom... That's about it. We said: "Unfortunately it's so slight that it never quite holds your attention." Good bonuses though: commentary by the directors, plus 98 minutes more stuff, including a BFI Q&A and numerous featurettes. In **STING** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), a 12-year-old girl makes a pet of a spider that falls from the sky. It then keeps getting bigger – as does its appetite for human flesh... We said: "The family's unhappy dynamic gives it an emotional core that offers a touch of Spielbergian charm." No extras here. M Night Shyamalan's daughter Ishana makes her feature debut with **THE WATCHED** (out now, DVD). Yep, no Blu-ray – and no extras either. Dakota Fanning plays a young woman who gets lost in a forest, where creatures trap people in structure, then look at them via a two-way mirror. We said: "Shyamalan knows how to generate tension, but this could have benefitted from a couple of extra rewrites."



POLOSTAN

SFX Loves

Betwixt and between

★★★★★

RELEASED 26 SEPTEMBER
320 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Neal Stephenson**
Publisher **The Borough Press**

Not for the first time with a new book from Neal Stephenson, there was a debate about whether *SFX* should be reviewing *Polostan* at all. The reason? Because this first volume in the Bomb Light cycle is set in the USA and the USSR in the years between the First and Second World Wars.

No spaceships are involved. No time travel or dragons either. Real-life historical figures appear. Those who want only to read reviews of books with at least a splash of the overtly incredible can look away now.

Except, of course, Stephenson's historical fiction has always been, in its way, as fantastical as his genre offerings – in great part because his focus is so often on *knowledge workers*: researchers, thinkers and those who surround them. It's an approach he first used in *Cryptonomicon* (1999), which linked 1940s codebreakers to the dotcom boom, and honed in the Baroque Cycle (2004-05), which explored the Enlightenment.

It's as yet unclear where the plot of the Bomb Light cycle will ultimately land; the press release talks of "an expansive historical epic of intrigue and international espionage, presaging the dawn of the Atomic Age" and *Polostan*, as an opening volume, sets up more than it resolves. But a calculated guess is that Stephenson is now employing similar techniques to look anew at how the interwar years shaped our world.

These were, lest we forget, extraordinary times. In the USA, the crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression. In the USSR, the death of Lenin in 1924 brought the despotic Stalin to power. Communism, fascism and liberalism competed for primacy. Physicists were preparing the ground for the atomic age. Squint and there are parallels with today, which may even be one reason Stephenson has chosen the interwar era to chronicle.

Our guide to this strange world is Dawn Rae Bjornberg, a figure equally at home in the USA and USSR, and simultaneously an outsider in both countries. Born in the American West, her father is Russian, a revolutionary who takes her to live in Leningrad (present-day St Petersburg), and renames her Aurora. As a teenager, she lives in Montana, where she learns to handle horses.

This is knowledge that proves handy when, in Washington DC at the same time as the Bonus Army – demonstrators linked to First World War veterans – she finds herself playing polo with the capital's social and military elite.

Oddly, and it says much about the quality of Stephenson's prose that this never seems tricksy, a knowledge of polo will later prove crucial to her career as a Russian spy – although career is something of a misnomer in that she's recruited by the murderous sexual predator Beria and her choice is essentially serve or die.

Throw in Dawn's obsession with Bonnie Parker, machine-gun running, the history of American radicalism, the Chicago Century of Progress World's Fair, physicist Niels Bohr, high-altitude balloon

> **"Your head buzzes with the compelling oddness of it all"**

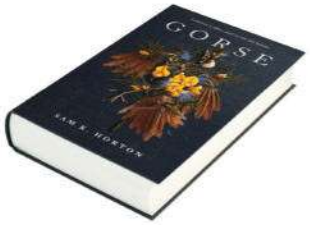
experiments and encounters with a menacing George S Patton, and there's a dizzying amount going on here. So much indeed that you finish *Polostan* feeling as if you've just read a brilliant SF novel – your head buzzes with the compelling oddness of it all.

Which is when the disappointment sets in because it will, presumably, be a good few months before we see a second volume and, as previously noted, much remains unresolved.

Not just in plot terms, either – there's also a sense that we don't yet quite understand Dawn as well as we might. That nagging irritation (which may even be a design feature) aside, this is a quite brilliant book that confirms Stephenson's place as the world's foremost and most wildly imaginative purveyor of historical slipstream fiction.

Jonathan Wright

i Real-life figures in *Polostan* include balloonist Jean Piccard, who flew to the stratosphere to research cosmic rays.



GORSE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 12 SEPTEMBER
400 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Sam K Horton**
Publisher **Solaris Books**

"Eythin" is the Cornish word for gorse, and in this fantasy debut, first in a series set in 18th century Cornwall, also the name of a lost island that's the distant home of Keeper Pelagius Hunt.

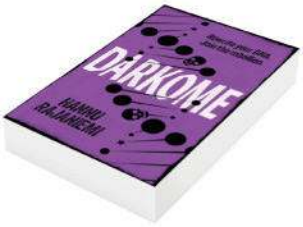
We don't learn much about that home in this novel, though, which is centred on Pel's later life near the town of Mirecoombe and its surrounding moor, filled with invisible piskies and spriggans who help the townsfolk in exchange for gifts and charms.

Pel, now an impossibly old man, helps to keep things in balance, with the aid of his ward Nancy (herself once a changeling). But with the Reverend Cleaver drawing more of the town away from folklore and towards the beliefs of the church, and some "thing" stalking the moors and murdering innocent men and women, balance feels very hard to find.

There's a poetic lilt to the prose here that helps ground this mythology in timeworn British folklore. There's also a strong theme of stubborn old men, whose continual refusal to consider another path is frustratingly real, with devastating consequences.

The book's slow at times, with a climax that's a little too easy given the effort taken to get there, but the characters and lore are well-developed, and we look forward to further explorations of the worlds created here.

Rhian Drinkwater



DARKOME

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 SEPTEMBER
250 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Hannu Rajaniemi**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Big tech has already given us smartphones, social media and AI, and – if sci-fi thriller *Darkome* is to be believed – it won't be long before we're also wearing smart devices capable of upgrading our immune systems on the fly. It seems we should be afraid. Very afraid.

Finnish author Hannu Rajaniemi (*The Quantum Thief, Summerland*) keeps his near-future setting spookily plausible, ensuring that the companies, CEOs and restrictive business practices in the story have clear parallels with the real world.

The book asks pertinent questions about how much control we should cede to corporations, and whether surrendering control of personal information is an acceptable price to pay for our health.

But *Darkome* is much more than an allegorical thinkpiece. The pacy, efficient storytelling ensures that the plot is never overwhelmed by the extensive, tech-heavy exposition, and makes sure you question every character's motives – though many of the answers will have to wait for the sequel.

Its biggest strength, however, is Inara, an extremely relatable protagonist whose hereditary Li-Fraumeni syndrome makes her particularly susceptible to cancer. She's a smart, flawed and vulnerable focal point for a story in which the human body can be both miraculous and terrifying. **Richard Edwards**

EXODUS: THE ARCHIMEDES ENGINE

Ark ship aftermath

★★★★½

RELEASED 19 SEPTEMBER
928 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Peter F Hamilton**
Publisher **Tor**

For anyone worried about the idea of Peter F Hamilton writing a book tied to a new videogame, *Exodus*, let's start with reassuring news. This isn't a novel locked to a predetermined narrative or one that suggests a take-the-money lack of creativity. Rather, as the initial announcement of the book put it, it tells a story set "lightyears away from the star system featured in the game".

The first half of a duology, *The Archimede Engine* is also, following on from his audiobook-exclusive Arkship Trilogy, a novel that marks Hamilton's return to widescreen space opera. And it's good to have him back, because it's packed with gloriously imaginative flourishes, multiple intersecting plotlines and brilliantly realised battle scenes.

The setup runs as follows. It's 42350 and, in the Kelowan system, part of the Centauri Cluster, the arkship Diligent arrives, 40 millennia after it left "Sol". Celestials, post-humans who have little in common with the creatures they used to be, dominate Kelowan. The Celestials' rule is, for all their talk of stability, repressive. Which is why young Finn, the privileged son of a human family permitted by the Celestials to administer the planet Gondiar, dreams of becoming a "Traveler" in space.

One quick land-for-arkship swap with Diligent's owner, old Earth entrepreneur Josias, and Finn is on the way to realising his dream. There's one huge problem. As he sets out to source the necessary drive that will enable him to traverse the depths of space without journeys taking years, Finn becomes caught up in the lethal political machinations of the Celestials. He's not alone in this, as we gradually learn.

While you can spot the odd plot point coming and there are a few character types familiar from previous Hamilton novels, this is a bravura performance that reminds you just how good its creator is at space opera. **Jonathan Wright**

Exodus doesn't have a release date fixed yet. You can watch the trailer at exodusgame.com.

BROKEN GHOSTS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 SEPTEMBER
352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **JD Oswald**
Publisher **Wildfire**

An orphaned child, a remote woodland and a mysterious new friend in old-fashioned clothing... This coming-of-age story from JD Oswald (author of fantasy epic *The Ballad Of Sir Benfro*) isn't necessarily hugely original, but it is heartfelt and haunting.

In 1985, 12-year-old Phoebe's world is torn apart when her parents are killed in a fire in her home town of Cupar, Scotland. To make matters worse, she's then forced to move to the tiny village of Llancwm in Wales to live with an uncle and aunt she barely knows.

Between missing her friends and occasional run-ins with the local hooligan twins, she struggles to adapt to a new life, language and culture. But there's more going on in Llancwm than it first seems, as different strangers seem to recognise her face, and no one has heard of the girl she plays with in the woods...

In parallel to these goings-on, the Phoebe of 2023 is forced to return to Wales to process yet more loss and reevaluate her feelings towards the village. It's a shame there isn't more exploration of the years between the two time periods, as the resolution feels a little too neat. But between layers of stubborn prejudices and family mysteries – and the occasional ghost – there's a poignant portrait of grief and a loving family working their way through the toughest of times. **Rhian Drinkwater**

MAGIC REALMS: THE ART OF FIGHTING FANTASY

Dungeons & Drawings

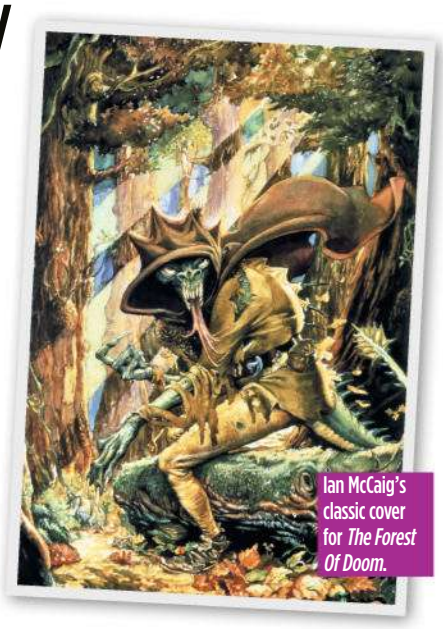
★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 SEPTEMBER
345 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Jonathan Green**
Publisher **Unbound**

***Deathtrap Dungeon* is 40** years old this year. If that stat sends a shiver down your spine, this coffee table book celebration of the *Fighting Fantasy* range may inspire a Proustian rush.

It covers not only the original 59 gamebooks published by Puffin, but later reprints and revivals by Wizard Books and Scholastic. Twenty-nine key artists get a particular focus, each honoured with a biography delving into topics like how they entered the industry, how the commissioning process worked and their specific techniques. As well as finished cover art, there are a handful of rough sketches, and plenty of black and white interior illustrations.

With the brief being to present the player's viewpoint, the latter typically have the dynamism of a gimmick moment in an old 3D movie, as living skeletons, hulking barbarians and the like rush towards the reader wielding fearsome weaponry.

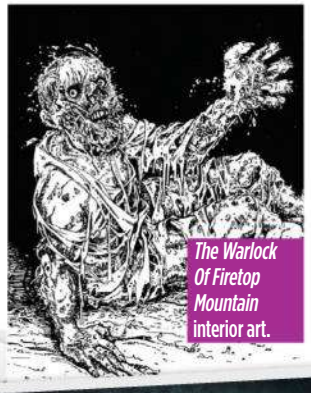


Ian McCaig's classic cover for *The Forest Of Doom.*

The work of Ian McCaig (beautifully detailed), John Blanche (putrid, faintly Bosch-ian) and Ian Miller (Durer-influenced, gothic) particularly impresses, but the standard is high throughout.

Another 26 artists get brief namechecks. There are also thumbnail galleries of every Puffin, Wizard and Scholastic release, selected foreign editions, and the covers of quarterly magazine *Warlock*, plus short sections on *FF* graphic novels and miniature figures.

Our one quibble regards the puzzling scarcity of captions: only a handful of images come with identifying text. Good luck working out which books the others are taken from, as it's often a total mystery. **Ian Berriman**



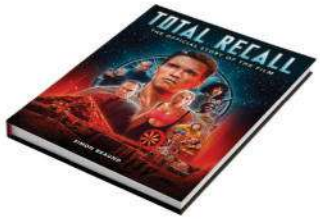
The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain interior art.

Alternate cover sketches for *Appointment With FEAR.*

Ian Miller's cover for *Phantoms Of Fear.*

Terry Oakes's Brain Slayer art, from *Out Of The Pit.*

i A new *FF* gamebook is out this month: Ian Livingstone's *The Dungeon On Blood Island* is a sequel to *Deathtrap Dungeon*.



TOTAL RECALL: THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE FILM

★★★★☆

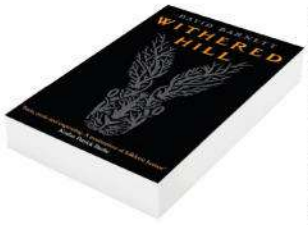
RELEASED OUT NOW!
160 pages | Hardback
Author **Simon Braund**
Publisher **Titan Books**

Philip K Dick's deeply metaphysical short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" always felt like unlikely source material for an overblown Arnold Schwarzenegger blockbuster. It's appropriate, then, that the behind-the-scenes story of how *Total Recall* got its ass to Mars is nearly as improbable as the movie itself.

In an alternative universe, it could have been a David Cronenberg film – with Richard Dreyfuss or Patrick Swayze as its leading man – until Arnie and *RoboCop* director Paul Verhoeven teamed up to take the adaptation in a very different direction.

Drawing on a vast archive of storyboards, concept art and behind-the-scenes photos, including shots detailing Rob Bottin's remarkable prosthetics work, it's a visual treat. The book's at its best, however, when author Simon Braund's forensic research tracks the early stages of *Total Recall*'s evolution.

A phrase he uses while summarising Cronenberg's vision – "space prohibits detail" – sums it up, however. This is very much a whistlestop tour of the genesis, production and release of an unconventional action movie. Adding depth to the admirable breadth might have made for an even more satisfying read. **Richard Edwards**



WITHERED HILL

★★★½☆

RELEASED 26 SEPTEMBER

368 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **David Barnett**

Publisher **Canelo Books**

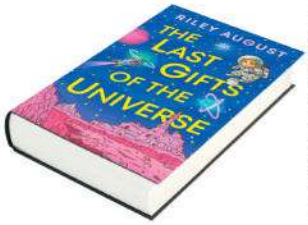
Ever go through an experience so dramatic that it feels like your life beforehand happened to a different person?

When Sophie finds herself at Withered Hill, she can't even remember her former life. She can't remember anything. The townspeople help her, in their way – mostly through pagan rituals and feasts – and slowly, she figures things out. Through a split timeline, we also find out about Sophie's life in London, and as the two Sophies converge, the true horror is revealed.

The construction of the novel is really clever: in one narrative, Sophie is finding her feet in Withered Hill, shepherded from one spooky experience to the next by villagers who'd feel at home on Summerisle; in the other, she's dating a mysterious man who showers her with weird gifts while struggling with a data entry job that includes way more Latin than it should. She's never sure what's happening to her, and neither are we, but it's all very sinister – and when it pays off, it's really satisfying.

The one thing stopping this book from being truly terrifying is that Withered Hill seems kind of... nice, actually? Sure, there's something supernatural lurking in the woods and you can't go out by yourself on Samhain, but compared to the horrors of London rent and minimum-wage jobs, the odd ritual sacrifice starts to feel quite reasonable.

Sarah Dobbs



THE LAST GIFTS OF THE UNIVERSE

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 SEPTEMBER

208 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Riley August**

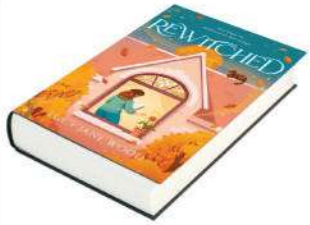
Publisher **Del Rey**

Marketed with the hashtag #SpaceCat and featuring a cute kitty in a spacesuit on the cover, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was some kind of cartoony, comedic nonsense. However, it's not, featuring the kind of hard SF concepts so beloved of Isaac Asimov or Arthur C Clarke. Those authors famously neglected to flesh out their human characters. Riley August, meanwhile, has done the reverse... and the cat isn't exactly two-dimensional.

The big concept here is that some unnamed force has wiped out almost all life in the universe. With Earth's future looking bleak – are we next? – siblings Scout and Kieran are tasked with visiting dead worlds to see if the obliterated residents left any clues as to their attackers.

One thing all civilisations have in common, it seems, is the desire to leave a "cache" to help out anyone wondering at their fate. Shuttling down to ghost planets with Pumpkin the cat, our protagonists soon clash with agents from Verity Co, a conglomerate more interested in gathering caches for profit.

Weave in diary entries from a long-dead alien, Scout's endless struggle with anxiety, and the mundane realities of life in space – pizza is an almost religious experience – and you have an intriguing study of life, morality and yearning cosmic angst. **Jayne Nelson**



REWITCHED

★★★★☆

RELEASED 19 SEPTEMBER

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Lucy Jane Wood**

Publisher **Macmillan**

It's easy to be dismissive of YA "cosy fantasy", but sometimes all you need in life is a sweet, funny, undemanding adventure to pass the time; a story of rainstorms, bookshops, cats, handsome men and magic. Debut author Lucy Jane Wood's *Rewitched* hits all these marks. This is a lovely warm bath of a book.

On her 30th birthday, witch Bella is forced to take part in a surprise ceremony to determine if she still "deserves" her magical powers. It should be a doddle, but she's been lazy with them for years, so some swotting-up is required.

An old wizard named Artorius is assigned as her mentor; he's a convicted, but now reformed, murderer. When someone starts to threaten Bella and her loved ones, she needs to figure out who's responsible – and whether Artorius is involved.

Okay, so the central plot is rather flimsy and you may have its kinks figured out by the midway point. And Bella's romance with her hunky wizard bodyguard is pretty shallow, too. But these elements aren't actually that important: this is Bella's story, and she's completely convincing as a human being, bickering amusingly with her best friend and offering pleasing relatability.

With her at the heart of this adorable little tale, it's hard for it to go wrong – and it doesn't.

Jayne Nelson

REISSUES

Our paperbacks pick is the latest by Naomi Alderman, author of *The Power*. In **THE FUTURE** (★★★★½, 12 September), Silicon Valley billionaires are hatching grand plans to live in comfort while the

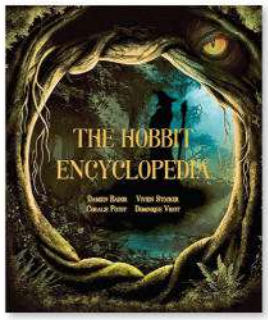
rest of the world goes to hell. Unfolding like an airport thriller, it centres on an internet-famous survivalist and the daughter of a cult leader. We said: "A terrific novel that, for all its dystopian elements, may even make you optimistic about what lies ahead as it offers approaches for building a better world." The first book in Ariel Kaplan's Mirror Realm Cycle, **THE POMEGRANATE GATE** (★★★★½, out now, Solaris) entwines Jewish mythology with a dark period of Jewish history. Set in Inquisition-era Spain, it sees a young

woman passing through a gate to another world, where she learns about the magical Mazik people and the "mirror effect" whereby things that happen in our world are echoed in theirs. We said: "An impressive piece of fantasy storytelling with two fully-realised worlds and a lyrical writing style that's a pleasure to sink into." Finally, Saara El-Arifi's faerie fantasy **FAEBOUND** (★★★★☆, out now, HarperVoyager) is set in a land dominated by warring Elf tribes; meanwhile, living in crystal caves beneath the

battlefields are the Fae. Starting off as a grimdark tale of neverending war, it morphs into a throbbing romance. We said: "El-Arifi excels at world-building... Brace for characters 'cloaked only in desire' shagging."

BULLET TIME

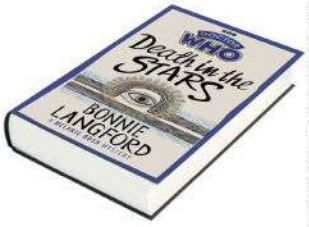
A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



THE HOBBIT ENCYCLOPEDIA

RELEASED 5 SEPTEMBER
336 pages | Hardback/ebook
Authors **Damien Bador, Vivien Stocker, Coralie Potot, Dominique Vigot**
Publisher **Frances Lincoln**

- Compiled by experts keen to promote Tolkien's original work in France (this is a translation).
- Rudimentary, sometimes charming illustrations are split between three artists, none of them up to Alan Lee or John Howe's standard.
- Peter Jackson's films are ignored, other than to say they offer a "distorted view" of Tolkien's plot (a fair enough point!).
- "Characters" highlights just how little thought Tolkien put into his individual Dwarves (they're listed en masse under "Thorin And Company").
- Other sections include "Creatures"; "Languages"; "Objects And Architecture" (including the Hobbits' pipes!); "Places"; "Notable Events" and "Sources Of Inspiration".
- This isn't prestige enough to be a coffee-table book, but it *is* a good source of Hobbity information.



DOCTOR WHO: DEATH IN THE STARS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
272 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Authors **Bonnie Langford, Jacqueline Rayner**
Publisher **BBC Books**

The idea of a *Doctor Who* companion actor writing their own spin-off stories isn't a new one (Ian Marter wrote *Harry Sullivan's War* in 1986), but it's stepped up in recent years, with Sophie Aldred and Alex Kingston both continuing their characters' adventures in print. Now it's Bonnie Langford's turn, filling in some of what happened after Mel left the TARDIS in 1987 to travel around with loveable rogue Sabalom Glitz.

Death In The Stars is billed as a murder mystery, but it takes a while to get to that point, opening with Mel and Glitz approaching a trading station in the hope of launching their new business together. Several brushes with a horrible death ensue, before the pair find themselves stranded on a spaceship where the crew are slowly being killed off...

Once the companion fans loved to hate, the Mel in this book is fired with possibilities and a love of adventure (and aerobics), constantly trying to change the world for the better in a way you can't help but smile at.

It's somewhat uneven in tone – style-wise it reads more like YA, but with occasional quite intense moments of horror – but it's all so good-hearted, like its star, that you don't really mind the odd glass of carrot juice. **Rhian Drinkwater**

LUCY UNDYING

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 10 SEPTEMBER
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Kiersten White**
Publisher **Del Rey**

Here's a *Dracula* sequel that, ironically, doesn't infuse Bram Stoker's tale with fresh blood but instead saps it of all vitality.

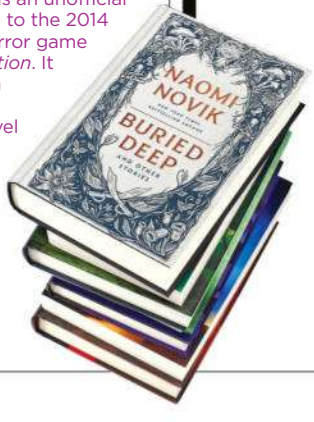
It focuses on the character of Lucy Westenra, the beautiful girl who is slowly turned into a vampire while Mina Harker and her suitors try to save her. Kiersten White's novel focuses on Lucy's experiences before and after becoming a vampire, and a storyline from the point of view of Iris, an original character who falls in love with her.

Unfortunately, as is the case with so many retellings, Lucy's character has been butchered to fit modern standards of femininity. In *Dracula*, Lucy is girlish and giggly. There's a gossamer lightness to her that makes her magnetic. *Lucy Undying* inverts that and tells readers that actually, Lucy hated her suitors and felt suffocated by the idea of marriage and duty. Didn't you know she was actually a feminist girlboss?

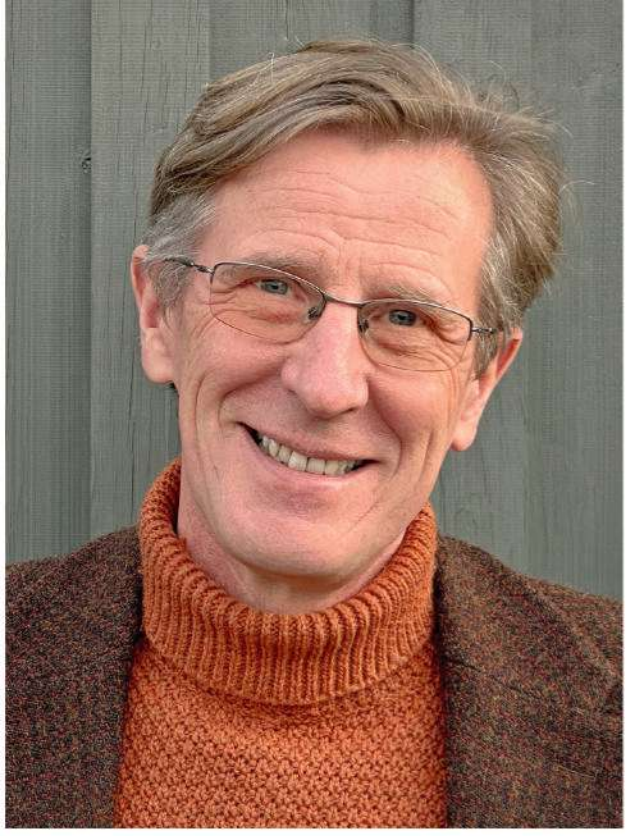
The sapphic spin on Lucy's story also feels silly and underbaked. There are cringeworthy endearments between Lucy and Iris like "little cabbage" and "butter chicken", and a line that will make you put the book down and take a deep breath: "Breasts really are fantastic". Where's the carnality? The feral desire? It's lost somewhere between the pages, just like Lucy herself. **Kimberley Ballard**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books that we couldn't squeeze in. Described as "a love letter to the Brontë sisters", Jennifer Delaney's gothic romantasy **TALES OF A MONSTROUS HEART** (out now, Gollancz) sees a half-fae woman taking up a mage partnership with the mysterious Lord Blackthorn, an expert in dark magic, and investigating mysterious disappearances. **BURIED DEEP** (17 September, Del Rey) is an anthology of stories by Naomi Novik, author of the Temeraire series and the Scholomance trilogy. It includes a first glimpse at Abandon, the setting of her upcoming epic fantasy series, Folly. Edited by Johnny Mains, **BOUND IN BLOOD** (10 September, Titan) collects 19 stories of cursed and haunted books, written by the likes of Charlie Higson, Ramsey Campbell and *Peep Show*'s Isy Suttie. Horror fans may recognise Anna Bogutskaya's name from her thoughtful, feminist contributions to Blu-ray bonuses. Her new book **FEEDING THE MONSTER** (out now, Faber & Faber) explores how the genre "responds to and fuels our feelings of fear, anxiety, pain, hunger and power". Coffee table book **STAR TREK: THE ART OF GLENN HETRICK'S ALCHEMY STUDIOS** (out now, Titan) showcases the alien creations of the team behind the prosthetics on all five seasons of *Discovery*. Finally, Andy Kelly's **PERFECT ORGANISM** (out now, Unbound) is an unofficial companion to the 2014 survival horror game *Alien: Isolation*. It includes an in-depth level-by-level analysis of every mission, plus info on the scenes and features that never made the final cut.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE



SARAH REEVE

Philip Reeve

The man behind the Mortal Engines books is writin' in the rain

Describe the room in which you typically write.

There's an old garage next to my house which we converted into a sort of studio. It has nice views across the garden to Dartmoor. As well as a writing room it doubled as props and costumes store for a short Arthurian film I made last year, "Gwenevere", so I'm surrounded by shields, swords and helmets at the moment.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

I usually prefer silence, though sometimes if there's background noise, music works as a sort of buffer. It can't be anything with lyrics though.

Minimalism works well – Steve Reich or Philip Glass – or just ambient noise; there are hours of rain effects on YouTube which have been very useful.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

The latest is usually my favourite, because it's freshest in my mind and full of what currently interests me. So that would be *Thunder City*.

Looking further back, I'm pretty sure the Utterly Dark trilogy is the best thing I've written on my own, and I'm also proud of the books I've done for younger readers with my co-author Sarah McIntyre.

> **"You'd think once you've written a few books you'd know how to do it"**

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could somehow travel back in time and "fix"?

I'm sure they all contain loads of small things I wish I'd phrased better, so I try never to read them once they're published! But I don't think I'd change any of the stories.

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

I read everything I could find. Favourites were the *Asterix* books, Rosemary Sutcliff, Alan Garner, and later, great swathes of SF. Most of all I loved *The Lord Of The Rings* – I still re-read that every few years, and it gets better and better.

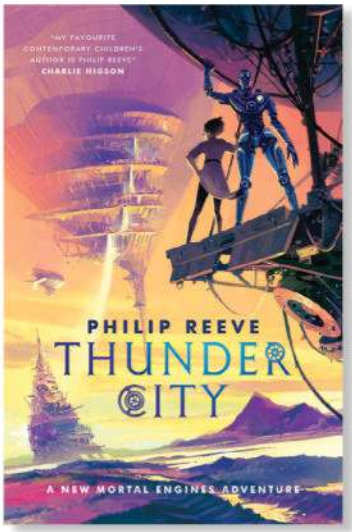
Can you recommend one book you love that's not very well known?

Geraldine McCaughrean is well known as a children's author but in the '90s she wrote an adult novel, *Fire's Astonishment*.

It's a sort of historical romance, but it has an excellent dragon in it – and it's so beautifully written that it gave me the shove I needed to sit down and start writing my own books. I've named an airship after it in *Thunder City*.

What's the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

Writing never gets any easier. You'd think once you've written a few books you'd know how to do it, but each story has its own problems, so you're always starting again from scratch. I'm not sure that's a bad thing though – I guess it keeps things interesting.



Reeve loves the work of Geraldine McCaughrean.

DAVID LEVENSON/GETTY

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

I find most writing advice spectacularly useless, and it's best avoided, I think. But one piece I do bear in mind is the old Hollywood adage, "If the second act isn't working, change the first act."

Thunder City, the latest book in the Mortal Engines series, is out on 26 September, published by Scholastic.

BLOOD HUNT

Vamping it up

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Jed MacKay**
Artist **Pepe Larraz**

ISSUES 1-5 **Event comics have** often used wild tactics to grab attention, but Marvel's latest gambit of asking "Hey, what if we added more intestines?" is certainly an unexpected step.

Blood Hunt is a massive crossover that pitches the Marvel Universe against an army of vampires, and the additional strategy here is that each instalment of the event's core five-issue miniseries also has a polybagged Red Band variant edition, with extra violence and gore for "mature" audiences.

It's a deeply weird and utterly shameless sales gimmick, and the series uses this to set a more deliberately horrific tone, as legendary half-vamp vampire hunter Blade unexpectedly betrays the Avengers and unleashes a horde of bloodsuckers across the world to wreak havoc, led by the menacing Blood Coven.

The first couple of issues are, admittedly, a lot of fun, cranking the pace up to maximum and pulling off some entertainingly nasty set-pieces. They're also helped immeasurably by the presence of Pepe Larraz on art duties. He's been doing spectacular work since making his name on 2019's *House Of X*, and makes the core series a visually stunning ride, clearly enjoying getting to indulge in some full-on lurid horror.

This horror is turned up even further in the Red Band editions, but most of it pushes the action into ludicrous splatter (especially the end of issue one, which goes from "Dr Strange is stabbed" to "Dr Strange is messily sliced in half").

There are barely any moments where the story is actually *helped* by this approach, and while writer Jed MacKay does deliver some enjoyable dialogue and a few decent moments of character interplay, he can't avoid some classic event comic blunders.

The biggest of them all is that *Blood Hunt* is aggressively unfriendly to new readers, even with its simple "superheroes vs vampires" concept. So much of the story only makes full sense if you've been following at least three separate Marvel titles, while the core miniseries barely stands on its own, with major plot developments outsourced to crossover miniseries such as *Dracula: Blood Hunt* and *Strange Academy: Blood Hunt*.

As a result, despite the doomy tone, *Blood Hunt* ends up feeling rushed and abrupt, as if both *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* had been edited down to a 40-minute highlights reel. The one exception to this is a major twist involving Doctor Doom which properly lands – but otherwise, *Blood Hunt* is a haphazard event that never quite lives up to its impressive visuals. **Saxon Bullock**

Gore blimey, Dr Strange has gone *really* strange.

> **A deeply weird and utterly shameless sales gimmick**

ⓘ Blade's original '70s look was based on black movie stars of the time, most notably NFL footballer/actor Jim Brown.

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON LIVES!

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Skybound Entertainment/Image Comics**
Writers **Dan Watters, Ram V**
Artist **Matthew Roberts**

ISSUES 1-4 **Considering that its** ecological themes are even more relevant now than when the original film was first released, it's unfortunate that the Creature himself remains such a peripheral presence in this '80s-set four-parter, the second of Skybound's Universal Monsters line.

Journalist Kate Marsden, who has obsessively tracked serial killer Darwin Collier to the Amazon, is quite an unsympathetic protagonist, and apart from local guide Christiano, the remainder of the characters aren't particularly likeable either.

There are some neat callbacks to the 1954 movie, most notably with the return of scientist Dr Edwin Thompson, and some poignant scenes of the Creature watching over Kate as she swims, which are sensitively depicted by Matthew Roberts.

Drowning is a regular motif, being Collier's favoured method of murder, while Kate also has a habit of needing to be rescued in the water. Collier's Buffalo Bill-esque transformation into a grotesque parody of the Creature is bizarre, and there's a visceral energy to his final confrontation with the Gill-man. Hopefully if we visit the Black Lagoon again, our amphibious friend will be more to the fore. **Stephen Jewell**

STINGRAY COMIC ANTHOLOGY: TALES FROM THE DEPTHS

★★★★☆

RELEASED
LATE SEPTEMBER
Publisher **Anderson Entertainment**
Writers/artists **Various**

COLLECTION **Anderson** Entertainment has added all-new material to previous *Comic Anthology* titles, but go further with this first of two volumes of *Stingray* strips from *TV Century 21*, commissioning five new stories to run in between the older ones as part of 60th anniversary event Deadly Uprising.

Purists might have preferred to have the vintage comics reproduced on their own, but while not adding anything substantial to the overall narrative, the new stories by writers such as James Swallow and Ian Edginton fit seamlessly among the older tales.

Probably written by Alan Fennell, the original strips have a pulpy, breathless feel due to being serialised in two-page instalments, which initially took pride of place in the centre of the comic, in lavishly coloured and intricately crafted double-page spreads drawn by Ron Embleton. Later work by Gerry Embleton, Michael Strand and Colin Andrew has no such constrictions.

The new art ranges from John McCrea's kinetic cartooning to Matt Brooker's sumptuous linework and the atmospheric illustrations of Keith Burns, who draws a mean Stingray. An enticing cliffhanger will leave you with a sinking feeling until the next instalment arrives. **Stephen Jewell**

THE ULTIMATES

Revolution Action

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Deniz Camp**
Artist **Juan Frigeri**

ISSUES 1-3 **Marvel's new iteration** of the Ultimate Universe has taken a little while to find its feet, but there's finally a clear focus beyond its ultra-complicated backstory. Recasting Marvel heroes as revolutionary underdogs out to topple the rulers of a dark alternate version of history, this latest remix of the Marvel Universe gets its centrepiece with new ongoing title *The Ultimates*, rebooting the series originally created by Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch.

Directly picking up the story threads from last year's *Ultimate Universe* one-shot special, the story follows Tony Stark, Steve Rogers and Reed Richards as they try to assemble a team capable of taking on the totalitarian forces controlling the world. Each issue sees them acquiring new versions of familiar characters (including She-Hulk, America Chavez and Hank Pym), while we also get more insight into this alternate history and the superpowered tyrants ruling it.

"Least effective of all the new Ultimate titles"

Writer Deniz Camp has some good concepts on his side and sensibly keeps each of these first three issues relatively self-contained, delivering some big-scale and relatively satisfying action sequences. Unfortunately, he's much less confident with the characterisation and dialogue, going for surface-level quips, two-dimensional heroes and subtext with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Not helping matters is Juan Frigeri's workmanlike art, which frequently lacks the energy and polish that the series really needs. There are a handful of interesting moments here, but right now *The Ultimates* is the least effective of all the new Ultimate titles, and feels dangerously close to being an outright misfire. **Saxon Bullock**

i Comic-wise, Camp's main inspirations for the series were Grant Morrison's classic *JLA* run, and *Planetary* by Warren Ellis.

BATMAN: GOTHAM BY GASLIGHT – THE KRYPTONIAN AGE

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Andy Diggle**
Artist **Leandro Fernández**

ISSUES 1-3 ***Gotham By Gaslight*** (1989) was a classic one-off comic that became the bedrock of the Elseworlds imprint, DC's home for stories that reimagine established characters in alternate continuities. In the case of *Gotham By Gaslight*, that involved transposing Batman to the 19th century and pitting him against Jack the Ripper.

This five-issue sequel by Andy Diggle and Leandro Fernández (replacing the original creative team of Brian Augustyn, Mike Mignola, P Craig Russell and David Hornung) represents an expansion of the premise. It's 1889 and Gotham is stepping into "the Kryptonian Age", with heroes and villains seeking relics from Superman's lost homeworld.

Each issue brings with it new takes on familiar characters – Catwoman, Wonder Woman and John Constantine all show up, and they're just the start – to the point where calling this a Batman comic sometimes feels like a bit of a misnomer.

While Bruce may be sidelined, Diggle's script is a fun romp through pulp fiction tropes and Fernández's shadowy art nods towards the look of Mignola's work while also doing its own thing. It's not breaking any ground like the original did – how could it? – but *The Kryptonian Age* has style and panache. **Will Salmon**

FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN

Some sparks, but few fireworks

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **PC, Xbox Series X|S**
Publisher **Kepler Interactive**

VIDEOGAME ***Flintlock*'s ambition** to follow in the footsteps of the recent *God Of War* games seem evident from the off, but being a third-person fantasy game with axe-swinging and an over-the-shoulder camera isn't enough to convincingly mimic Kratos' mythic massacres. Still, there's undeniable charm in the presentation, and even a few clever ideas – they're just being smothered by some generic ones.

It's set in the ravaged world of Kian, where scattered forces of pre-industrial humans are holding back hordes of undead spilling out from a portal opened by a pantheon of spiteful, self-interested gods. Protagonist Nor Vanek leads the resistance to slay the gods and stop the apocalypse, partnered with enigmatic fox-god Enki, whose motives for helping are initially suspiciously unclear.

What follows is a rather brisk odyssey – barely a dozen hours – in which Nor butchers her way through Kian's various battlefields, while her relationship with Enki develops in predictable, proven patterns. Too much of *Flintlock* is just that: predictable and proven.

A bit *God Of War* and a bit Soulslike, it struggles to carve out an identity beyond its obvious inspirations. In part that's because many of the abilities that actually make combat fun are buried deep in the skill trees, when they probably should've been offered up from the start. And the side quests and characterisation don't feel particularly imaginative – we're very much in the "my wife went missing picking mushrooms, please help" territory.

It's a shame, because there are moments when *Flintlock*'s better self emerges. A short-range pistol for countering enemies à la *Bloodborne* helps elevate the hack-and-slash combat, and there's a genuinely great XP system where Nor builds up her multipliers through unbroken combos that the player must then manually choose when to bank and redeem. Inevitably getting too ambitious and losing all that hard-earned progress when they're tagged by an unexpected projectile...

Concepts like this are admirable, but *Flintlock*'s moments of inspiration and intelligence are buried too deep in more conservative design. Still, it's hard to dislike – and certainly doesn't overstay its welcome. **Joel D Franey**

i Developers A44 Games took inspiration from Mesopotamian mythology – Enki is the name of a Mesopotamian god.

Come and visit Hull – the locals are very friendly.

CYGNI: ALL GUNS BLAZING

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**
Publisher **Konami**

VIDEOGAME **Ever look at** modern consoles' gloss and find yourself longing for the gameplay of the '80s and '90s? Then this one's for you. *Cygni* looks like a modern game, but it's a traditional vertical shooter, through and through.

Instead of opting for a gimmick like most modern takes on the genre, this one sticks to its (great many) guns and simply gives you two heights of attack: air and ground. Depth comes from balancing your attack power versus your ship's shields using the shoulder bumpers, providing a neat risk versus reward mechanism.

Cygni itself is a planet, on which humans are attacked by a biomechanical alien race which they'd thought was dead, and whose world they'd been looting for technology and power. You play as a headstrong female pilot who is charismatic enough in cutscenes, but doesn't bring anything to the gameplay itself... except for saving humanity, of course.

That should take six hours, but only if you can handle the chaos, which isn't a given. The game chucks *hundreds* of enemies, bullets and laser beams at you, frequently descending into an exercise in shield replenishment over shooting skill. It's a pity because the upgrade system, massive bosses and high score potential are all exemplary. Messy, then, but very cool. **Justin Towell**

LAIKA: FRAME X FRAME

The house that Coraline built

★★★★½

RUNNING UNTIL **1 OCTOBER**

Venue **BFI Southbank**

"When does it start moving?" "Just smile."

EXHIBITION **Practitioners of** stop-motion animation focus obsessively on tiny details. The same goes for stop-motion fans, who'll best appreciate this excellent exhibition – though more general viewers will also be fascinated by the intricacy of these miniature marvels. Entry is free, but you must book a timeslot at the BFI website.

The exhibition covers the five feature films by the American studio Laika, all-Oscar nominated and often sinister and scary: *Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, *The Boxtrolls*, *Kubo And The Two Strings* and *Missing Link*. Each film gets its own dedicated, comprehensive-feeling display. These include puppets and sets, augmented by "making of" videos. You can inspect Coraline's sumptuous otherworld bedroom, for instance, and the tangle of pneumatic tubes which the Boxtrolls use to get about.

There's an emphasis on all the little props and objects and background details which make the films' diverse worlds feel real. You'll find many of them hidden in drawers that you pull open. Exploring the zombie film *ParaNorman*, for example, you might find tiny pulp horror books, or little pink zombie brains...

The text discussing how Laika uses CG together with stop-motion could be more precise on where the real objects end and the digital effects start. There's also nothing on Laika's origins, or its star talents such as Travis Knight

> **"You can inspect Coraline's otherworld bedroom"**

(who's Laika's CEO, and directed *Kubo*) and *Coraline*'s director Henry Selick. In addition, the material about next year's Laika release *Wildwood* is nothing more than an evocative tease. Still, it remains a splendid exhibition – and remember, it's free!

Andrew Osmond

i Don't miss the Laika artwork on the landing leading to the exhibition, including two gorgeous paintings for *Wildwood*.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

LANDMARKS

Sci-fi filmmakers simply *love* destroying the sort of places that get put on postcards. What can you remember about these famous structures?

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
In the *Doctor Who* episode "The Christmas Invasion", whereabouts is UNIT's base located?

QUESTION 2
In *Mars Attacks!*, the invading Martians destroy all manner of landmarks. Which one do they treat like a set of bowling pins?

QUESTION 3
Which Ray Harryhausen film climaxes in Rome, with a face-off between the military and a monster at the Colosseum?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this film, *and* its director.

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
What's the name of the character who parachutes off the Eiffel Tower in *A View To A Kill*?

QUESTION 6
In *Superman II*, which American landmark does Ursa deface with her heat vision?

QUESTION 7
Which 1989 movie climaxes at the tomb of Al Khazneh in Petra, Jordan?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify the film from this moment.

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
Which 1979 horror film climaxes with the sight of scores of zombies shambling across the Brooklyn Bridge?

QUESTION 10
Which famous British landmark is nearly destroyed in the 2007 *Doctor Who* Christmas special "Voyage Of The Damned"?

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 11
Which famous structure features on the Starfleet Academy emblem?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify the film from this moment.

QUESTION 13
In the 2015 movie *Pixels*, which iconic building gets destroyed by a game of *Arkanoid*?

QUESTION 14
In the 1998 version of *Godzilla*, in which sporting arena did the creature lay its eggs?

QUESTION 15
In *The Goodies* episode "Kitten Kong", which London landmark does oversized feline Twinkle bring crashing to the ground?

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify the film from this moment.

QUESTION 17
In *Fringe*'s alternate universe, what sort of vehicle could you catch from the Empire State Building?

QUESTION 18
What's the very last thing seen on screen at the end of *28 Weeks Later*?

QUESTION 19
Where did the climax of the 1976 version of *King Kong* take place?

QUESTION 20
According to *Doctor Who*, what would you find underneath Stonehenge in the year 102 AD?

Answers
1 Under the Tower Of London 2 The Easter Island statues 3 *20 Million Miles To Earth* 4 *Planet Of The Apes*, Tim Burton 5 May Day 6 Mount Rushmore 7 *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* 8 *Cloverfield* 9 *Zombie Flesh Eaters* 10 Buckingham Palace 11 The Golden Gate Bridge 12 *Independence Day* 13 The Taj Mahal 14 Madison Square Garden 15 The Post Office Tower/GPO Tower 16 *Superman III* 17 A Zeppelin 18 The Eiffel Tower 19 The World Trade Center 20 The Pandorica

How did you do?

What kind of building are you?

0-5 Dolls' house

6-10 Shed

11-15 Bungalow

16-19 Des res

20 Mansion

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SFX

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"Those giant invisible cats are always so ticklish around the whiskers"

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Sci-Fi Disco

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

I'm too young to have had to pick a side in the punk/disco wars, but while I wouldn't have burned the records (à la "Disco Demolition Night"), I might have rocked a DISCO SUCKS badge. That said, I think sci-fi and disco are a very good fit. Both are prone to synthesised sounds and sparkly silver outfits. And I've got a soft spot for the '70s discs that encouraged people to flap their nylon wing collars to the sounds of space.

Domenico Monardo, aka Meco, is the best known exponent. His 1977 album *Star Wars And Other Galactic Funk*, which includes a 16-minute medley of John Williams cues, went platinum. Personally, I prefer the *Music From Star Trek* LP, thanks to a version of *The Motion Picture*'s theme that'd make Spock tap his foot.

Meco's success inspired Dave Gallacher, the producer behind Mankind, who hit 25 in 1978 with their take on the *Doctor Who* theme – not quite an instrumental, thanks to vocodered vocals ("Guardian of the universe... he travels through time and space"), added in the hope of encouraging Radio 1 airplay. It earned them a dry-ice shrouded spot on *Top Of The Pops*, with keyboard player Mark Stevens rocking a Tom Baker-style hat and scarf. I own a 12" on TARDIS-blue vinyl, and it beats the Dominic Glynn and Keff McCulloch make-overs.

These were just the tip of the iceberg. Alexander Courage's *Star Trek* music was funkified by The Charles Randolph Grean Sound and Cosmo Wave And The Space Cadets. Stu Phillips and Giorgio Moroder both recorded disco riffs on the *Battlestar Galactica* theme. And that five-note melody from *Close Encounters* got quite the workout. But my favourite is Nostromo's version of Jerry Goldsmith's *Alien* theme, masterminded by Kenny Denton, an engineer at Wembley's De Lane Lea Studios, and a pal of 20th Century Fox's ad director (who suggested the idea).

Denton hired a man with sci-fi pedigree: Dave Lawson, whose ARP 2600 keyboard can be heard in *Star Wars*' Cantina band sequence. Due to his Warner connection, Denton was able to source a chestburster scream. Though when Sigourney Weaver's agent demanded an exorbitant fee for dialogue extracts, he decided to "whisper and scream a few lines myself and add a sound effect of a cat meowing" instead! In space, they *can* hear you boogie...

Ian draws the line at "Flintstone Disco" by Universal Robot Band.

Fact Attack!

- Mankind guitarist Dave Christopher and drummer Graham Jarvis also spent some of 1978 playing in Cliff Richard's band.
- This may be why a different guitarist and drummer were on *TOTP*. But the producer also said Christopher "wasn't good looking enough"! Burn.
- Nostromo went on to release discofied versions of the themes for *The Black Hole* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. None of the singles charted.
- Superheroes got the treatment too, with The Doctor Exx Band and 101 Strings taking on John Williams's *Superman* theme.
- Check out bit.ly/scifidisco for a Spotify playlist of some sci-fi disco favourites which we've put together for you lucky people.

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WINONA RYDER
CATHERINE O'HARA
JUSTIN THEROUX
MONICA BELLUCCI
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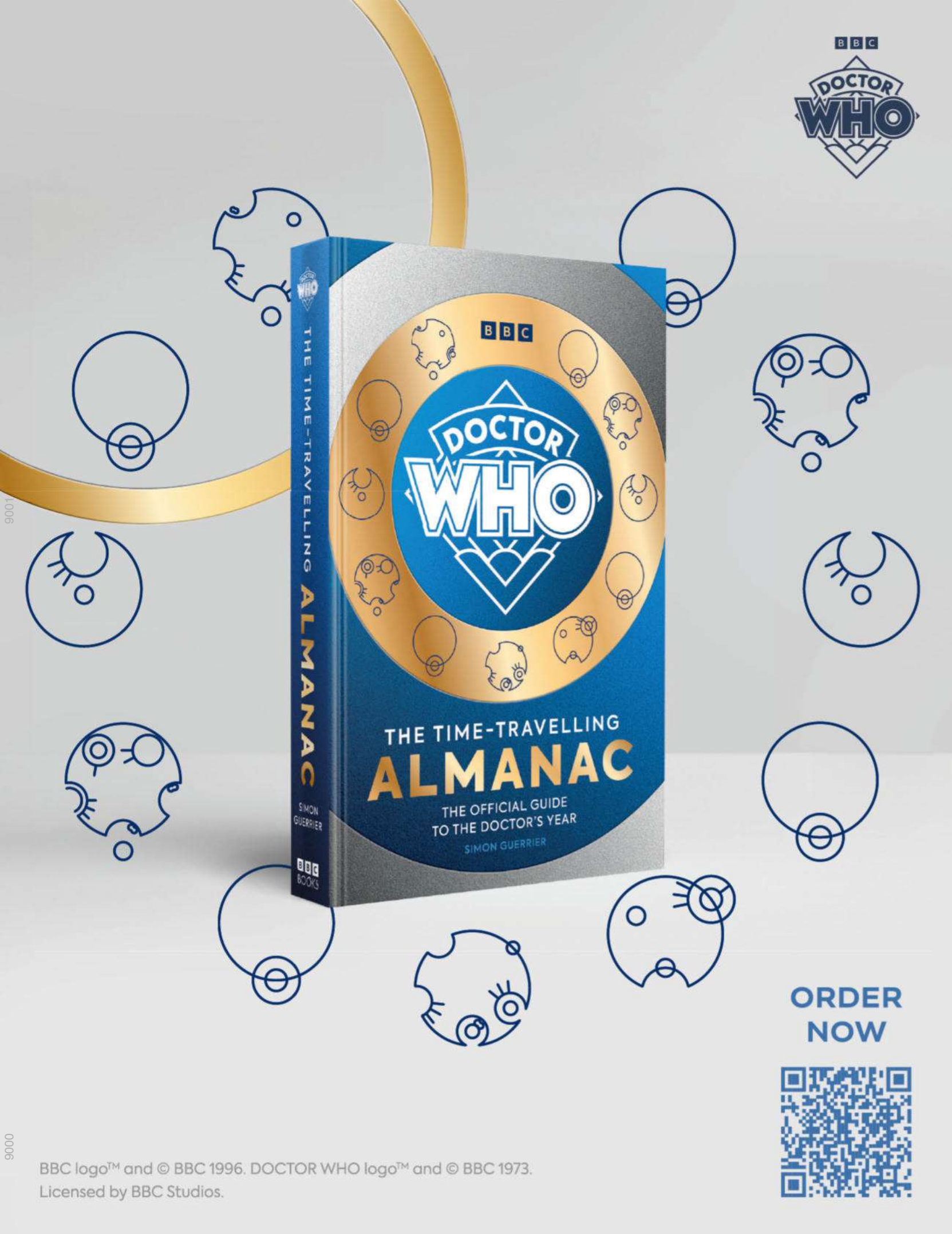

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